Circles outside the circle: Expanding the group frame through dance/movement therapy and art therapy

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ABSTRACT

Much has been written about basic concepts of group theory as applied to group psychotherapy. Though there are many theories, there is agreement about several basic concepts that can be found in groups regardless of the theoretical perspective. Much has also been written regarding how basic concepts of group theory can be found and applied to all kinds of groups, not just psychotherapy groups. This paper focuses on the possibilities of a group theory class in a graduate creative arts therapy program as an optimal setting in which to convey not only understanding of group theory as therapy, but also as an avenue for awareness of social justice, relating to society as a large group. The paper demonstrates the use of movement and art-making as the vehicles to understanding of group theory as it relates to therapy, social, and environmental issues, and will focus on the use of dance/movement therapy and art therapy as vehicles for increasing awareness and effecting change.

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Introduction

For nearly a decade, we have co-taught Group Creative Arts Therapy I and II in Pratt Institute's Graduate Creative Arts Therapy Department. These group courses, are highly experiential in nature because students learn about group process and dynamics by participating in an actual group experience in the classroom setting. Dance and art therapy are particularly effective ways of deepening group process and of teaching group theory. Through our co-teaching and integration of our disciplines within this format, we continue to contemplate a variety of dynamics that occur in our classes. We have more recently been considering a larger context for the material taught in the group courses as well as in our own work as creative arts therapists. It has become increasingly clear to us as teachers that we have a responsibility to assist our students in how to recognize, consider, and address issues of social justice, social welfare and the environment in their work as creative arts therapists.

With this in mind, this paper addresses the ways in which group creative arts therapy reaches out beyond the less visible boundary of small groups and into these larger realms. We believe that group is the place where these concerns are seen and can, ultimately, be

influenced, and as Kutash and Wolf state, "The group is a microcosm of the outside world" (Kutash & Wolf, 1993, p. 79). As we assist our students in understanding their own process as part of a group and then in understanding how to use dance and art therapy to further group process and development as clinicians, we are also assisting them in considering what they can apply to the larger context of groups in society.

One of our beliefs is that if our students have a good enough experience as part of a group during their training, they will be more likely to choose to be members of other groups when they leave school; that is, they are more likely to be part of a larger Creative Arts Therapy (CAT) community, for example, if they have had a good enough experience as part of the CAT community at Pratt. We see this as part of a parallel process. If our students are having a useful experience as part of a group at Pratt, they are more likely to successfully engage clients in groups at their internships; and if their clients have good enough experiences as group members while in treatment, they are more likely to choose to be members of other groups outside of treatment. In theory, they may choose to be involved and active members of their communities.

A broader debate is required about the relationship between ecological, economic and social justice principles and objectives (Fritze, Blashki, Burke, & Wiseman, 2008). Nonetheless, we agree with Ormont (1995) that the group itself is the instrument of change and for this reason we're choosing to discuss these larger

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issues through this vehicle. The large group is a symbolic container for all of society's feelings and experiences (Schneider, 2003).

Beginning group: issues of safety in establishing relationships

Trust walk

What needs to happen to make the group a positive experience? One approach we use in group classes is the modern analytic approach as we find it particularly compatible with creative arts therapy. Ormont (1995) explains, "[The modern approach] is marked by intense interactions between members" (p. 31). Over the years we have seen that what happens in our classes also happens in the world-at-large. We have seen that group theory relates to all groups, including society as a whole. We teach our students to realize they have an impact not only on the patients they treat but also on the larger groups in which their patients belong. By focusing on particular aspects of group development, they ultimately help their patients to have an impact in their world.

We begin our group process by drawing attention to the question of safety. Early in the group's life we introduce an exercise we call a *trust walk*. Group members work in pairs. Each pair has a leader and a follower. The follower closes her or his eyes and allows the leader to take her or him on a walk—first only through the use of touch, and then only by giving verbal instructions. The leader is expected to keep the follower physically safe. But we find that followers often realize that they do not feel safe, despite believing that their leaders will not allow them to be harmed. We see followers walking slowly with their hands out in front of them, using their feet to test the ground in front of them. They talk about realizing they are unable to trust. And we talk about the difference between being safe and feeling safe. We ask them to think about what they need to feel safe, or at least safe enough to take risks. We see the leaders taking great care of followers in this exercise, gently placing the followers' hands on a surface to help them know where they are or telling the followers very specific details about the next step they are about to take.

But sometimes we also see short leaders walk tall followers into a low-hanging branch, which the leaders did not notice because they could safely pass under it. We see leaders let their attention wander for a moment, and the followers bump into a sculpture. Or we see leaders ask followers to take a great risk, asking them to run or jump, and we see the followers decide whether to take such risks or not. These outcomes reflect what anyone might experience as a member of any group in society. Sometimes people are safe but do not feel safe. Sometimes people are well cared for and know it. And sometimes people are led into an obstacle for a variety of different reasons.

One of the things we have noticed in this exercise is that generally when roles are switched and the follower becomes the leader, the second leader is influenced by her or his experience as follower. The new leader will take action based on what worked for them. This is the beginning of forming a trusting relationship. The leader can think about what she or he would want and give it to the follower. This is only the beginning, though, because this way of decision making does not take into account that the follower may want something different than the leader wants.

In this early stage of making relationships in group, the trust walk leaders are thinking primarily about themselves and what they want. This corresponds to Yalom's (1995) first stage of group development, during which the task of group members is to consider whether there is a place for them in the group and whether there is anything of value for them in this group. In the context of

a training group, this exercise helps group members to think about safety and trust, and what will be necessary to deepen relationships. In the larger context of society, this raises the issue of the responsibility that we have for each other. In speaking about the August 2010 decision of US District Court Judge Vaughn Walker to overthrow California Proposition 8, which would have banned same sex marriage, executive director for Equality California Geoff Kors stated, "Judge Walker has preserved our democracy by ruling that a majority cannot deny a minority group of fundamental freedoms" (Dwyer, 2010, para. 9). When we ask our students to think not only of their group at Pratt but also of the many groups to which they belong, we may ask them to consider the difference in making decisions by consensus rather than by majority rule. How will they negotiate safety in the groups they run as therapists? Can they help their clients to think about negotiating safely in the many groups that they are part of, starting with being in a group of clients?

Flocking

As the group members continue to consider questions of safety and trust, we involve them in the work of making and eventually deepening relationships in the group. Early in the life of the group we introduce an exercise we call *flocking*. In this exercise, four movers form a diamond shape. All four movers face the same direction. The person at the front point of the diamond is the leader. She or he leads, knowing that the three movers behind are following but not actually seeing the followers. Any time the leader does not want to lead anymore, she or he changes direction, as do the other three movers. Now someone else is at the point of the diamond and is the leader. In this way the leadership changes continually, with the whole group following whoever is at the point of the diamond. If we are working with only one diamond, then the rest of the group members will rotate into the diamond at will, tapping someone out and taking that person's place in the formation. During this process, group members consider several things: how to lead, how long to lead, when to give up leadership, whom to give the leadership to, when to enter the diamond, and whom to tap out. This exercise assists the group in deepening the relationships they have begun to form in the group. Each member of the group has the opportunity to experience the feeling of having the rest of the members in the diamond willingly follow her or his leadership. In other words, everyone has an experience of being joined, which is a powerful experience as a member of a group.

Additionally, this seemingly simple exercise allows group members to access and discuss all manner of issues that affect the way they enter into and participate in the group. That is, group members directly experience how they lead. Questions arise that appear to be about moving as leaders and have implications for forming relationships and deepening intimacy. These issues can also be considered metaphors for the larger groups found in society. As group members come to understand something of how they make decisions as leaders and group members, they can eventually assist their clients in understanding something about how they choose to enter into and deepen relationships, both on a personal level and on the level of the communities in which they live and move.

Chace

As the group establishes a sense of trust and safety, the members become more conscious of the ways they enter into the group. Morton (2007) suggests that freedom can only come from the collective practice of creating an environment. He further suggests that art could help ecology by modeling an environment based on love rather than death (p. 24). One way that we support a deeper entering and greater intimacy in the group is through use of

Chacian circles. Bloom (2006) notes that Chace's approach to group experience and group cohesiveness facilitates understanding of the relationship of each individual to the group. Chace's use of mirroring as a way of making relationships in improvisational movement groups provides opportunities for individual group members to have a sense of belonging to the group. Pines (as cited in Bloom, 2006, p. 32) elaborates on the importance of the group as a whole: "The more group members can see and feel their every experience to be meaningful to the group as a whole, [the more] their basic matrix of self is remobilized and worked through in the new group field."

This concept of the group itself being the instrument of change bears direct relationship to the larger context of groups in society. We support our group members in exploring their relationships to the group as a whole and in considering how they form a group culture, in part through the use of group improvisation, with Chace's approach as a guiding format. Group members might be invited to physically warm up alone, or with others, eventually forming a group that is led by the teacher who is a dance/movement therapist. From the start, group members are supported in forming relationships through mirroring movement they see in fellow group members. The leader uses mirroring to join the group in an experience where the group itself is the focus as much as the individual members. In Chace-like style, the leader follows the movement and the content of the group rather than introducing these things her- or himself. The group is able to use movement to explore and understand group themes and relationships—and to develop both.

For example, one day the group began standing shoulder to shoulder with a person in the middle. The person in the middle allowed herself to fall, trusting the group to catch her. Group members took turns in the middle position. When we had exhausted this exploration, the group continued to stand for a while shoulder to shoulder. Gradually people began to separate and form smaller subgroups. There was considerable closeness in the subgroups, with lots of leaning on each other, piling on top of each other, crawling under each other. The composition of the subgroups continually changed. After a while, some group members began to move apart, so that some people were outside and not in the close subgroups anymore. These members began to talk about feeling outside and wanting to get in but not wanting to intrude. Some people did not want to be responsible for others. Some did not want to be responsible for themselves. Questions came up about fears regarding being a member of the group. In the end, group members recognized a great desire for closeness and a feeling of care for each other. This example seems a good paradigm of the early stage of belonging to any group. When group members are allowed to explore their relationship to the group while being supported in developing a culture that values the group, issues of belonging, sameness, and difference can be effectively addressed.

Deepening relationships through rebellion: excessive use of materials

As a group continues to meet and members explore relationships to it, individuals will invariable begin disagree with each other, the group leaders, and the group as a whole. Yalom (1995) describes this as the "storming" phase of group development:

> In the second stage "storming"—the group shifts from preoccupation with acceptance, approval, commitment to the group, definitions of accepted behavior, and the search for orientation, structure, and meaning to a preoccupation with dominance, control and power. The conflict characteristic of this phase is among members or between members and leader. Each member attempts to establish his or her preferred amount of

initiative and power. Gradually, a control hierarchy, a social pecking order emerges. (p. 297)

Over the course of several classes, the particular group class we are about to describe was instructed to participate in a "scavenger hunt." The group was moving into the second stage of group development at this point. This directive of going out into the environment to collect self-objects has the ability to offer group members the opportunity to connect with their senses and, at the same time, claim, redefine, or alter discarded objects (natural, synthetic, both) or what most consider "garbage." Once objects had been collected, students were asked to re-create or reconstruct the found fragments. Scavenger hunting, in and of itself, can offer incredible insights and be very healing as items, once considered rubbish, are reclaimed and make contact with our internal constructs. In a group setting, this directive adds the component of being executed in the context of and with group members thus promoting a positive group experience of being in relationship to one another.

While each member worked on her or his individual piece of reclaimed debris, one member sat slightly outside of the group circle with her steel-ribbed sheet, found on the streets of New York City, and a gallon of sealant intended for collage. She proceeded to take the sealant and slowly poor it down over the steel rack. As leaders of this training group, we watched this behavior and allowed ourselves to quietly observe our emotional experiences. At first, it was quite elaborate. Each blob of white goo dribbled down in patterns like a thick white rain bouncing in and around a rugged terrain. It was so glutinous and appealing—almost mesmerizing. As it continued on, however, we each became more uncomfortable. Thoughts of consumerism in our society and the impact on the environment became foreground. We were both aware of wanting her to stop – right away – and to be thoughtful, to recognize that the budget for art supplies was not endless. Then came the smell. It was terrible. The classroom that was sealed from fresh air with only the smell of sealant was becoming more and more overwhelming and intolerable. We started to feel angry.

Although one might see our responses as a bit blown out of proportion, this internal reaction seemed quite fitting when considering the ways humans manipulate matter and impact the world we occupy. For example, the World Health Organization (2008, para. 13) reports that air pollution in a major environmental risk to health and is estimated to cause approximately two million premature deaths worldwide per year, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2009, para. 2) reports that in 2009, Americans produced about 243 million tons of *municipal solid waste*, or about 4.3 pounds of waste per person per day.

But groups leaders need to remember that most nonverbal communications in group are unconscious and must be treated respectfully to avoid reactions such as denial, anger, upset, embarrassment, or hurt (Rutan & Stone, 2001). We are of the belief that change does not begin to occur with simply changing a behavior but by allowing expression of the feeling, preferably nonverbally. Once communicated nonverbally, the opportunity for verbal dialogue arises along with awareness and insight. Before we could respond, our student said to us, "Are you having a response to the way I was using materials?" After some dialogue, it became apparent that she had been attempting to get our attention and that this was her way of expressing her hostility toward the group. This communication was quite fitting given the group's phase of development. Her feelings of aggression were not just acted out but were brought to her awareness through talking about the experience. We told the student we noticed her and wondered if there was something she wanted to say. It was here that she found the space to directly express herself, and a meaningful dialogue emerged. Only through exploration can the group boundary remain fluid. Only

through a willingness to undergo further questioning and exploration can there be any hope for a sense of freedom and justice in any group, from small to large.

Illuminating the transition from storming to norming

A similar example was seen in a class setting where the group was asked to use materials (natural or synthetic) to create one group piece within an hour. This directive allows the group to explore their relationship to the material world with the intention of instigating awareness both individually and collectively. It also allows members to make connections to each other and the environment.

Unlike the previous example, this group was in a slightly more sophisticated developmental stage. They had spent quite a bit of time in conflict and were now vacillating back and forth between what Yalom (1995) calls "storming" and "norming." As previously mentioned, the storming phase is one of rebellion and conflict. Norming typically follows successful storming and is recognized by its "development of group cohesiveness" (Yalom, 1995, p. 302). The collecting and gathering that the directive encouraged was quite extensive in the more rural setting where this class took place. Materials gathered included rocks, branches, leaves, flowers, mural paper, paint, pastels, chalk, glue and tissue paper. The group proceeded to use all materials that had been gathered and picked. At first, there were careful steps taken to include respectful questions about space and boundaries. However, as some students began overstepping these boundaries by pouring paint and glue from five feet above the mural's surface, the group as a whole joined and boundary violation and excessive use of materials shortly became the norm. In an hour, the mural transformed from a well intentioned and aesthetically pleasing piece into a long jumble of objects and colors—overdone, overworked, gooey and wet.

When the group verbally processed the experience, members spoke about initially having had a pleasurable experience, describing it as playful, light, and indulgent. However, as more underlying feelings were expressed, it became apparent that a turn had been taken where members experienced disconnection, carelessness, and numbness. One man discussed how his piece had been violated with excess paint and random marks, and as a result, he disconnected from both his own piece and the aesthetics of the piece as a whole. He described the art piece as something he needed to distance himself from and had a hard time looking at its filth and mess, calling it disturbing and out of control. Another student had the desire to destroy it; yet another discussed how it was so ugly and hated it. The group members agreed that the piece did not work. They also confirmed that this unfinished piece described them perfectly in that moment.

Koger and Winter (2010) affirm:

When people mistake social or bureaucratic identity for their core sense of self, they quite naturally abuse the environment with which they feel no identification, connection, or empathy. However, through a deeper inquiry into their true interdependence with other people and other species, people may come to a more intelligent deeper relationship to the ecosphere, which gives a sense of common identification. (p. 305)

We could point to many theoretical constructs that explain what occurred as a result of the group's current phase of development. But just as the art piece represented the group at this time, our earth represents contemporary humanity. What is being dealt with here is akin to the original meaning of compassion: *suffering with*. It is the distress humans feel on behalf of the larger whole. It is the pain of the world itself, experienced in each person (Macy & Young-Brown, 1998). We have the capacity to find solutions that are not

simply products to buy, but ways of engaging with life (Rogers, 2010). Human psychology, both individually and collectively, impacts the ways space is utilized and matter is manipulated.

This, in turn, impacts our global predicament while simultaneously making continual and ongoing impressions on our very being. Shah (2010) states:

How we consume, and for what purposes drives how we extract resources, create products and produce pollution and waste. Issues relating to consumption hence also affect environmental degradation, poverty, hunger, and even the rise in obesity that is nearing levels similar to the official global poverty levels. (para. 15)

For relatively well-functioning adults, it's important to step up and sometimes slightly over the boundary to understand its' importance. Without this, the other side can only be imagined and very little meaning is left. We adults can also get caught up with the authority that sets the rules—not allowing the full development of our personal moral codes. The boundary, in these cases, is the place where simple pleasures of consuming come to an end and the pathway toward abuse emerges. In its first phase of stepping over this divide, a blissful state is experienced through the abandoning of restrictions and rules and of tending to ones libidinal desires. In the second phase, this state turns to overstimulation, anger, distress, depression, and disaffection. As leaders, allowing higher functioning groups with intact egos the opportunity to cross into this realm is often highly valuable to developing new awareness and insights when reflected back objectively by the leaders. Concerning the third phase, the above example serves as a way to understand this phenomenon as it relates to individuals, groups, communities, and the interplay with the global society. Here, we were able not only able to look at the dynamics within our small group but also the larger group addiction to consumerism and, perhaps inadvertently, aggression toward the earth. Reflecting on a scenario like this and allowing for a full range of emotions permits the group to move to the fourth phase entailing thinking. When thinking occurs, the ability to contemplate options for the future emerges. We want to emphasize that these options are individually based but may have global impact as well.

This back and forth relational dance, which Winnicott (1990) describes as the process where the pattern of the interaction is the focus of understanding, is core to creativity and the work in creative arts therapy. The ways in which we manipulate matter and utilize space directly impact our environment and vice versa. Thus, creativity is essential to the healing of our collective selves, our societies, and our earth. It is a mistake to separate issues of consumerism and relationship to the earth from issues of social welfare and justice, as each directly reflects and impacts the other.

Assisting a group in achieving autonomy

The group therapy class that we teach at Pratt has clearly identified us in the role of two leaders: a dance therapist and an art therapist. This format allows group members to explore their relationship to the idea of leader and authority. This is also important in a social context. We encourage our students to push at their comfort levels regarding accepting authority, challenging authority, and taking authority for themselves.

In one class, the group was divided in two. Half the group was moving with eyes closed and the other half was watching with the intention to switch roles at some point. The group leaders informed the group that we, the leaders, would be responsible for maintaining safety in the group; watchers had no responsibility other than to watch and attend to their responses. One of the movers unexpectedly increased the speed of his movement and bumped into a

wall before either of us could stop him. Though he was not hurt, he was startled, and the incident allowed for much useful exploration. Having set the structure, we recognized we were completely responsible. Group members discussed how it felt to be failed by their leaders and how it felt to watch a fellow group member have a collision after having been instructed not to intervene. Because this was a class for which they would be graded, group members did not feel they could disobey our directions. But not helping their classmate led to strong feelings as well. We were able to consider questions of social responsibility, how to decide when to intervene despite a structure that says otherwise, what price one pays when not intervening, and so on. These questions related directly to issues of social justice and to the work therapists do with clients of all sorts, but particularly with the disenfranchised.

Conclusion

The United States has enjoyed a long history of community arts movements that have conveyed the belief that cultural expression can serve as a means to be emancipated from various socioeconomic constraints. For example, Fitzgerald (2008) posits:

Exchanging knowledge through dance allows new relationships to form within society, and some of the borders that normally exist between different communities begin to blur, allowing for expansion and redefinition of personal worlds, as well as of the overall cultural fabric. (p. 259)

Politics and large scale decision-making have significant impact on the future of our world and, yet, underneath all policies are people—each with a very complex set of psychological structures. Therefore, how we bridge social and environmental constructs in our work as creative arts therapists and in training creative arts therapists is an incredibly important task and one that has tremendous merit and value. Art and movement allow people access to a whole battery of emotions and experiences that otherwise might lie dormant and inaccessible in the unconscious. As these experiences emerge through the opportunity to claim space in one's body and to manipulate matter, there develops the opportunity to analyze the (sometimes raw) expression. Through this examination, the connections to larger realms become illuminated and, ultimately, contemplated. The Office of the High Commission on Human Rights (1966) tells us that human beings can only enjoy freedom from fear and want if all people can enjoy their economic, social, and cultural rights. Moreover, it further states that each individual has a duty to other individuals and to the community to which she or he belongs, and as citizens of the world, individuals have a responsibility to strive for the promotion and observance of basic human rights.

In this paper, we have offered examples of small group dynamics that can be applied to larger groups with the hope that awareness will promote critical thinking and conscious action. To use some familiar words, we seek to send our students out into the world *thinking globally and acting locally*.

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