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CONSIDERATIONS ON GROUP DYNAMIC WORKING METHODS

and

THERAPEUTIC AND COUNSELING METHODS IN OVERVIEW

CONSIDERATIONS ON GROUP DYNAMIC WORKING METHODS

Group dynamics is a special field of social psychology that basically arose in opposition to classical psychoanalysis in alliance with scientific psychology, which wants systematic therapy research and accuses psychoanalysis of having particularly blurred boundaries between knowledge and belief.

Further attacks against psychoanalysis, which ultimately led to the emergence of group dynamic forms of therapy:

The profound intrusion into the personality in psychoanalysis carries the risk of authoritarian manipulation of the patient: in extreme cases, the analyst assumes the role of the "omniscient and omnipotent father," and any criticism from the patient, even if justified, can easily be dismissed as "resistance." (The reservations expressed by evangelicals, for example, against group dynamics correspond in content to the criticism with which group dynamics distanced itself from psychoanalysis!

The shift toward group dynamic forms of therapy also has "political" motives: psychoanalysis has been accused of being largely an upper- and middle-class therapy because many analysts, often unacknowledged, share S. Freud's view that psychoanalysis is only possible with a reasonably high level of intelligence.

Economic arguments also increasingly came to the fore: psychoanalysis is very costly and time-consuming. Group therapy is cheaper and "works" faster.

HISTORY

Group therapy is probably not such a new invention. It is likely that every culture and social structure in human history has had some techniques for remedying or alleviating mental abnormalities, "behavioral disorders," communication problems, etc. It is well known, for example, that medicine men treated and continue to treat the sick and disturbed in a kind of group therapy session.

In our cultural world, group dynamic processes could only be used as psychological medical therapy after Freud had formulated the basics of psychoanalytic therapy. In fact, Freud was the first to raise awareness of the role of groups. For example, he coined the term "family novel": The family is the first group we are confronted with: it is also the group that shapes us the most. The family is therefore referred to as a "natural group."

It is also our “inner group”: the experiences children have with their parents, siblings, and other relatives have a significant influence on their mental health. Freud coined the phrase that our personality is “the product of these first object relations.”

Group sociology began by observing how strongly human behavior in groups depends on this imprinting by the “inner” or “natural group.”

The observations yielded the following results:

In most groups, one member soon assumes the leadership role (alpha position); There are mainly four types of leaders: the stimulator, the caretaker, the interpreter, and the manager. The type of interaction between the leader and the rest of the group members distinguishes between “authoritarian” and “democratic” groups.

“Specialist roles” (beta roles) often develop for specific tasks and functions.

The majority of group members, especially in larger groups, have a “follower role” (gamma role), against which the more prominent roles can develop.

In “neurotic” groups, individual group members are forced into the role of scapegoat or “whipping boy” (omega role).

Sociograms (Moreno) and other methods of group research have repeatedly revealed this typical distribution of roles in a wide variety of spontaneous and working groups.

Although the term “group dynamics” only became common for this type of research in the 1940s, group research is older than that.

As early as 1957, P.R. Hofstätter summarized the work of social psychology available at that time in his book “Group Dynamics”:

- The first approaches to researching group processes (especially from the perspective of the group leader and his effect on the group members) can be found at the beginning of the 20th century, primarily in the military sector. After that, research interest focused on two other areas: schools and the workplace.
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- The “Hawthorne Experiments,” conducted by Elton Mayo between 1933 and 1945 with the workforce of a large American electrical company, became famous. The astonishing result at the time was that the formerly miserable working atmosphere was not improved by the research group systematically improving workplace conditions, but ultimately by the social researchers intensively engaging with the workers and their working conditions.

The fact that people were interested in their work and their personalities, that they were regarded as important members of a working group, ultimately spurred them on to unexpected social “achievements.” These observations gave group research a significant boost.

- J. Moreno coined the term “group psychotherapy” in 1932. He developed psychodrama as a method in which conflicts and mental disorders are dealt with through improvised play. By reenacting traumatic situations, not only is insight into the causes gained, but it is also possible to “act out” conflicts in a cathartic way. Group dynamics procedures are used in the subsequent group discussion. The method was continuously developed: later, so-called behavior drama was able to systematically use psychodramatic play for behavior modification.

- Moreno and the equally important Paul Schilder were doctors, and it was indeed from the world of medical experience that the impetus for group dynamics came: as early as 1906, the American doctor Josef Pratt activated the lethargic patients in his tuberculosis ward through group forces, albeit in a very brutal way: he deliberately made them compete for his favor and attention in order to make them physically more resilient — with success.

In the 1930s, L.C. Marsh, also an American physician, promoted a brotherhood group structure based on medieval monastic communities among groups of mentally ill patients in order to enhance the healing process, a model that was then practiced with some success by Alcoholics Anonymous.

- Paul Schilder and S.R. Slavson were then the first to work therapeutically in groups on a permanent basis. Schilder's intention in the 1930s was to “convey insight,” whereby he understood ‘insight’ to mean the ability to “recognize the structure of the real world and to adapt one's own actions to it.” It was particularly important to him to let the ideologies, attitudes, and preconceived opinions of the patients in the group clash with each other and then to work through the misunderstandings psychologically, with the therapist gently embodying the “quiet voice of reason” (Freud).

- Kurt Lewin, in whose school the term “group dynamics” was coined, devised a series of experimental arrangements that allowed him, among other things, to “measure” and evaluate the qualities of different leadership styles. He tested them in youth groups, e.g., in holiday camps, and always under realistic conditions: he analyzed the authoritarian style with its characteristics, the laissez-faire style, and the democratic style. Lewin's investigations provided lasting proof for the assumption that, at least in such spontaneous (informal) groups, the democratic

- Lewin's research provided the impetus for recognizing the importance of communication style within a group and the significance of group feelings. The structure of a group not only affects how well and how quickly the set goal is achieved; it also largely determines how group members feel about it. The American sociologist G.C. Homans introduced the term “sentiment” to describe the degree of well-being (positive) or discomfort (negative) that individuals feel within a group.

- This line of thinking led to the development of so-called self-assertion training in groups, which was originally used only to supplement the behavioral therapy that was already in common use.

- In addition to S. Freud's oppositional students, C.G. Jung's successors also developed their own techniques of group work, which primarily revolve around raising awareness of so-called archetypal contents of the unconscious, the archetypes of our thinking. This tradition includes, for example, A. Janov with primary therapy, E. Berne with transactional analysis (he assumes that every person is imprinted with a kind of script for their life by their educators; in the case of neurotic disorders, this script must be "rewritten" (whereby the group promotes the process of self-awareness and reformulation of one's own personality).

- Later group theories were also interspersed with elements from the early phase. Ruth C. Cohn, with her theme-oriented interactional method (she gives equal weight to the theme being discussed in a group and the emotional needs of the group members, as well as the distinct needs of the group as a whole; the aim is to continually strike a balance between these three factors);

F. Pearls with his "Gestalt therapy": he uses dreams as the main material for his group sessions, asking the dreamer to re-enact the characters and situations in the dream;

the so-called encounter groups, which are often quite rough (the aim is to tackle problems as directly as possible, which always means that the group member in question is repeatedly and forcefully confronted with their conflicts by the rest of the group);

Marathon groups are similarly intense (they often last up to 48 hours and continue until complete physical and mental exhaustion, with a minimum of sleep and breaks: they push the group members to the brink of collapse in order to trigger a "creative new beginning").

EXAMPLES

Three group therapies are presented as examples of specific approaches.

GESTALT THERAPY ACCORDING TO PEARLS

This primarily involves raising awareness of unfinished tasks that need to be resolved. The theory assumes that a disturbance in a psychological process is based on the avoidance of important "shapes," important parts of the self: desires, feelings, and thoughts are not integrated and remain "unfinished tasks" that tie up too much of a person's life energy.

The patient/client should now fully identify with these feelings, especially the frightening ones, so that what causes fear is integrated into the person and loses its frightening character.

The confrontation between therapist and patient/client takes place this is what makes this method special in front of a group, which is intended to ensure a more intense experience. The group does not usually intervene, but remains in the role of spectator. The group is the backdrop against which

the confrontation between therapist and patient takes place. The group members learn less through interaction with each other than through identification with the group member who is currently “on duty.” The group plays the role of a social reinforcer. For example, when the patient/client has found a concise formula for a previously avoided “gestalt” (e.g., when they have discovered a side of themselves that they previously did not want to acknowledge but now accept), they go from one group member to another, look them in the eye, and say, “I am this.”

PSYCHODRAMA ACCORDING TO MORENO

Psychodrama is particularly helpful for people who are better able to express themselves through actions than through words. J. Moreno came up with this method while watching children play: he saw that they were able to overcome hidden conflicts through play. In general, the group leader leaves it up to the group members to decide what they want to play. However, most of the time, these are traumatic scenes from the past, situations that someone has not been able to cope with. These experiences are repeated in a staged performance (e.g., the patient is once again a child who is punished by a ruthless father or waits in vain for loving attention from their mother). If the player is unable to cope with the feelings evoked by the scene or loses courage, the leader appoints a “helper ego” to continue playing in their place.

The emotional catharsis achieved by reviving unresolved situations can be supplemented in individual cases by specific modifications to the play. The patient then learns, for example, not to simply repeat the stressful situation, but to overcome it (to stay with the example: by defending himself against his father).

Psychodrama can therefore be adapted to different theories. It can be used in self-awareness groups, but can also serve simply to highlight problems or as a relatively harmless role play. This is probably why psychodrama is used in everything from child therapy to management training.

PRIMARY THERAPY ACCORDING TO JANOV

This involves overcoming “primal pain”: “Primal pain is what a child feels when it cannot be itself. Tension arises when pain is separated from consciousness. It is a diffuse pain. It is the pressure of denied, separated feelings that are pushing for release” (Janov). In therapy, adults should express what they did not dare to express as children, should address their absent parents directly, and in doing so, literally experience primal pain and primal experiences again, which are finally cried out, indicating the breaking down of the old defense system. After that, new identification is possible.

What is finally cried out are often just a few words ("Daddy. Be nice!“; ”Mommy, help me!“). This is followed by post-primary group therapy: the patients lie on mats and infect each other with their primal experiences, ”because a patient who is now defenseless finds it very difficult to hold back for half an hour or longer while another patient has their primal experience."

The entire therapy is preceded by a preparatory phase in which the patient lives in complete isolation and without alcohol or nicotine.

ATTEMPTS AT EVALUATION

l. Distinctions must be made

Group dynamics can be a category of the sociology of knowledge, a science, or an objective empirical diagnostic tool. This is how Lewin, who “invented” the term, understood group dynamics. He starts from the complexity of social relations and observes the laws of mutual influence,

the exchange and participation processes between 1. the inner and outer worlds of human beings, 2. between individuals and groups, 3. between groups, 4. between individuals, groups, and society.

Within the framework of his so-called field theory, Lewin developed his central thesis, according to which the characteristics of the aforementioned individual phenomena depend on the entire field. Here, group dynamics intersects with cybernetic and systems theory approaches, which identify and, to some extent, clarify the interdependence and mutual influence of the many systems in and with which we live. Group dynamics as a science has been a legitimate concern since the complexity of social life has been established as a fact. This leads to a holistic view of human beings and the relationships in which they live.

Linear thinking, which we are accustomed to, or positivistic scientific thinking, which has resulted in a fragmentation of reality, is therefore undergoing a justified correction. In my opinion, this is where the positive approaches for an exchange between theology and group dynamics lie, because theology, too, when it is biblically based and not caught up in Greek thinking, is concerned with the wholeness of human beings and the total interpretation of reality. In a certain sense, Lewin's approach to group dynamics and theology have the same basic interest.

Group dynamics can also mean a methodology in a simplified sense. This is how group dynamics is widely encountered in church practice: as a pragmatic tool for group work. This practice has rightly attracted criticism. Without theory, group dynamics is a tool of manipulation in the service of the determinable interests of group leaders. Since group dynamics theory (with the goal of overcoming human division) corresponds to the theological category of responsibility in the face of human reality, pure pragmatism is irresponsible.

Finally, group dynamics also refers to the sociodynamic process itself: phenomenologically. Here, statements are made about factual processes.

A distinction must therefore be made between pragmatic approaches to group dynamics and approaches that are integrated into a comprehensive theory of reality. One without the other is not only fruitless, but can actually reverse the original intentions of group dynamics.

2. Differentiated evaluation

In group dynamics, what D. von Oppen once expressed happens: “Firstly, I cannot find myself in solitary confinement. I need the full attention of other understanding people. And secondly, I only mature to the extent that I offer other people the same help in finding themselves.”

Seen in this light, group dynamics is basically a substitute for a lost social field, but with the goal of regaining social skills.

In group dynamic processes, in my opinion, the “interplay of primal distance and relationship” occurs, as M. Buber formulated the existential categories. However, group dynamics are skewed if one level is more pronounced than the other (this may be necessary at times as a transitional stage).

People should recognize their roles so that they can step out of them and become more “authentic.” This is part of the social learning that group dynamics aims to achieve. However, the group dynamics laboratory must enable people to do this even without the laboratory. Group dynamics basically works to make itself dispensable. If it “binds,” it becomes harmful.

Self-renunciation and the dismantling of self-righteousness must be relearned today. Group dynamics can be one way to achieve this. However, mismanagement can lead to something like “group justice.” The fact is that majority opinions can easily manipulate an individual in a group (group psychologist M. Sherif called this the autokinetic effect: due to their social nature, people apparently tend to conform to the judgment of others).

Groups structure themselves into positions (leaders, etc.). On the other hand, everyone should be helped to achieve maturity and greater maturity. Some theological conclusions were drawn from this counter-movement in the group process: according to A. Hollweg, this reflects the interrelationship between law and gospel. One should be cautious about further theological appropriation of group dynamics: something Christian does not happen automatically in the group process. It must be brought into the consciousness of the group members. It is certainly true that group dynamics have a greater affinity with biblical concepts of reality than other forms of psychotherapy, but holistic approaches do not automatically guarantee meaningfulness. There are also nihilistic holistic concepts of existence.

Different therapeutic approaches paralyze each other with their claims to exclusivity; in some cases, it is difficult to maintain the claim to scientific validity. The uncertainty of theory and methods within group therapies is ultimately a symptom of psychiatry's self-alienation. E. Fromm comments:

“Modern academic and experimental psychology is largely a science in which alienated researchers use alienated methods to study alienated people.”

This raises the question of the target dimension. Once again, Fromm: in order to achieve meaningful change in people, one would have had to “have an idea of what an unalienated human being is, of what it might mean to lead a life that revolves around being rather than having and using.”

What should it be about: primarily adaptation, the restoration of human functionality within certain groups or societies?

Theology must be particularly vigilant when therapeutic approaches increasingly resemble substitute religions. Group dynamics does not actually want this, but there are similarities: Janov, for example, praises people after the primal scream in a manner similar to how preachers used to praise converts, the redeemed, or the awakened who had cast off their old, sinful selves.

In my opinion, the church and theology should be primarily concerned with the scientific nature of theories and the practices developed from them.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE FIELD OF CHURCH EDUCATION

In the following, I would like to describe an example of group dynamic work from the church sector, based on my own memories rather than literature. I will describe the course and intentions of a so-called Clinical Pastoral Training/CPT, CPA.

GOALS

The pastors should be taught:

pastoral identity, i.e., clarity about the specific role of the pastor in the church and society;

deepened self-knowledge, i.e., specifically: insight into one's own possibilities and limitations, as well as awareness of one's own communication problems;

deepened knowledge of human nature, i.e., understanding of psychological processes, e.g., escape routes that are taken to avoid communication;

increased sensitivity to enable better listening skills;

understanding of group dynamics;

integration of theological aspects.

PROCEDURE

For several days, the participants conducted pastoral conversations in hospitals and a psychiatric clinic, which were then recorded as verbatim as possible.

The transcripts were then analyzed in the group, with three factors receiving particular attention: the patient's emotional expressions, the pastor's sensitivity, and the resulting course of the conversation. The patients' responses provided insight into the extent to which the pastor had listened and created a space of trust through their own contributions to the conversation.

Equally important were the so-called group discussions, which were conducted in the presence (but without intervention) of the supervisor on a topic chosen by the group. Initially, the group discussions revolved around factual questions on the so-called cognitive level. Almost imperceptibly, the group members increasingly turned to personal questions; they began to reflect on their roles and then also on their behavior within the group. The emotional and existential level of the conversation became increasingly significant. Feedback provided by the supervisor following the discussions provided insight into the degree of communication achieved and any unresolved issues.

From a similar perspective and in addition to this, the group members subjected some of their sermons, which they had heard together in church services or recorded on tape, to a “review.”

From a similar perspective, and in addition to this, the group members subjected some of their sermons, which they had heard together in church services or recorded on tape, to “feedback.” What was heard as the message and also what was evoked by the sermon in terms of feelings was

compared with the preacher's own interpretation of the sermon's intention. The divergences that emerged were examined in more detail.

INSIGHTS

The group members learned that a conversation is not just an exchange of words, but a process that is significantly influenced by feelings. The prerequisite for conducting a conversation is therefore to understand another person both linguistically and intuitively.

This first insight was not conveyed theoretically, but in practical implementation, i.e., as a repeatedly repeated and controlled experience.

The group members experienced for themselves that the integration of what they had learned was a process and was promoted by the community in the group. However, they also recognized that time is an essential factor in gaining a refined sensitivity.

Regarding the group process, it should be noted that the group only gradually grew together. Beyond initial politeness and later resistance, they sought a path to an ever deeper level of understanding and communication.

It was extremely impressive to learn how many obstacles stand in the way of such communication in practice, which were only overcome when each individual practiced listening and when at least one of two conversation partners was willing to question their values and themselves. This succeeded to the extent that an atmosphere of security and mutual acceptance developed in the group, something "familiar," so to speak.

However, the prerequisite (and also the goal) of fruitful pastoral care is this unadulterated communication. This creates the space in which the person seeking advice finds the way to themselves, confronts their situation with the proclamation of the Gospel and, in the best case scenario, leads their problem towards a solution.

THE PASTOR

Communication understood in this way is ultimately a question of the pastoral identity of the pastor. The group members consistently found that theological perplexity also represents an emotional problem for the pastor, which is suppressed rather than overcome by all kinds of defense mechanisms (e.g., intellectualization or a particular fondness for discussion). These unresolved problems prevent communication in pastoral counseling.

The group served as an "experimental training ground" in this regard. It succeeded in creating a space in which individuals could openly express their feelings, especially negative ones, and admit their perplexity. In such communication, the group members recognized that individuals can dare to enter into the "fellowship of the weak" and that they can trust that in this way, a u c h in this way, speech will be given that allows them to experience the reality of God.

The group members thus experienced firsthand that in pastoral care, truth is by no means conveyed exclusively through conversation techniques, but that truth is partner-related and group-related and can occur in encounters.

APPLICATION

The combination of conversation analysis and observation of group dynamics provided experiences that can contribute significantly to the accomplishment of central church tasks:

- for individual pastoral care

Conversation analysis served as methodically controlled preparation for a wide variety of individual pastoral care situations.

- for group work

For community group work, the group participants took away the insight that group work often fails because the group process is not consciously experienced, nor is it methodically controlled.

The most important insight for me was that group work is by no means just a question of organization, but primarily a question of communication.

- for the sermon

The group dynamic processing of sermons led to the realization that the preacher's responsibility extends not only to the cognitive content, but above all to the possible emotions of the listeners, i.e., to use earlier diction, to the consideration of the “inner group” and its interaction with the actual groups in which the sermon listener lives.