



## 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

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