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Group Development as Constructed Social Reality Revisited: The Constructivism of Small Groups

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ABSTRACT: *Constructivism can be used in small groups as specific techniques are applied for behavior changes in a group setting. Constructivism can also be used to describe group processes. The author presents a constructivist reexamination of group development, that is, how individuals come together to form a shared reality of their group experience. The study and treatment use of small groups present an especially good venue from which to view how constructivism and social constructionism meet. Several practice implications of the group-development model are identified and discussed, along with two constructivist techniques particularly well suited to the group modality.*

CONSTRUCTIVISM FOCUSES on how people make meaning in their lives. Nowhere is this phenomenon more clearly seen than in group work, a modality that forces members to develop a shared understanding of the treatment setting (Llewelyn & Dunnett, 1987). Kelly's (1955) theory of personal constructs, focusing as it does on how psychotherapy clients understand their world and how they place themselves and others within it, encourages clients to experiment actively with social interactions in controlled settings, which fits the group modality perfectly. Kelly recognized this application, stating that the client can develop roles and constructs within the group and learn how to apply them to other members and to the interactions within the group. The group "is like having a large well-equipped social laboratory" (Kelly, 1955, p. 1156).

In addressing this topic, one could talk about constructivism in small groups, or how constructivist techniques are used by members for individual change. One could also talk about the constructivism of small groups, or how constructivist thinking is used to describe group

processes. In this article, I focus primarily on the latter—how constructivism can be used to describe certain small group processes important for those who lead groups for client change (see Nye & Brower [1996b] for research on this topic). Several constructivism techniques that have been found to be particularly well suited for group settings are presented.

Use of constructivist techniques in groups requires group members to be in a certain psychological and social "place," whereby members are open to the experience of "hypothesis testing," in Kelly's terms, and have the language to test their constructs in the group. From a constructivist point of view, the group must be brought along as a loose collection of individuals, each of whom has his or her own perceptions and meanings, and developed into a cohesive, coordinated group in which perceptions and meanings are shared.

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Group development is often described as a collection of individuals with loose ties to one another who develop into a unified entity with an identity, structure, behavioral norms, and roles for members. The process by which a collection of individuals becomes a group has been described in the literature on stages of group development. Constructivism is a good theoretical perspective from which to reexamine these stages.

Franklin (1995) described the differences between *constructivism* and *social constructionism*—differences important for professionals interested in theory development and the application of theory to practice. In reading her article, I realized that my own thinking has focused primarily on constructivism—on how people make meaning in their lives through their perceptions, the operation of their cognitive and affective processes, and the mechanics of memory storage and retrieval. Small groups provide an ideal context for comparing how people differ in their use of these mechanical constructivist processes as they make sense of themselves within the small group.

At the same time, small groups can provide an ideal arena for the study of the operations of social constructionism, because a group's development of norms, roles, rules, and beliefs can serve as an analogue to the process that society goes through to develop its own norms, roles, rules, and beliefs. Note that the following list of elements conceptualizing "groupness" are similar to elements that define society (summarized from Hartford, 1963):

- Acceptance of other members and the development of patterns in interpersonal relations
- Development of group spirit, bond, identification with the group, cohesion, or "we" feeling
- Development of group goals and of sufficient commonness of purpose to make some decisions
- Evolution of group structure, the development of patterns of status and roles, and means of group control
- Development of continuity through program content and group activity
- Development of group culture through the creation of group norms, values, and patterns of expected behavior

- Stable and regular membership
- Development of relationships with relevant forces or agencies outside the group

The model of group development presented here is a description of how members develop shared and complimentary schemas (or cognitive and affective representations) for their group—including perceptions of other members, rules and norms for behavior, and views of themselves in the group. To make the description of this process easier to understand, it is necessary to make some assumptions about an "idealized" group. It will be assumed that the group has a well-defined beginning whereby all members join at the same time, members will feel committed to the group, and the group will require active interactions among the members. The model of development presented is also idealized in that it is described as if it proceeds in a straightforward, linear fashion. In these ways, I join other small-group theorists who use an idealized group form to facilitate their theory building (see Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Lang, 1981; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan & Hochberger, 1996; Yalom, 1995). Although real groups are often "messier" than an ideal group, the model of development that is presented is nevertheless applicable (see Wheelan & McKeage, 1993).

A Constructivist Model of Group Development

Beginning Anomie

The constructivist model of group development begins with a description of the group as inherently marked by anomie, or normlessness. The beginning group is similar to Merton's (1957) description of social anomie, which he defines as members in society facing disparities between social goals (or ends) and having the means to achieve them. Due to this disparity, beginning groups lack structures of communication, relationship, power, leadership, norms, and roles. Members lack clear purpose for themselves, and the group lacks a clear goal for itself. Each member attends to cues in the group situation that have salience for him or her and each struggles individually to "make sense" of these cues (Brower, 1989).

This beginning anomie defines a basic assumption of both constructivists and social constructionists—that what is important in a given situation is what the participants read into it rather than what is objectively present. This assumption is stated most succinctly by “radical constructivists” (Franklin, 1995); situations in and of themselves impart no meaning to participants; rather, participants imbue situations with meaning through the cues they pick out and respond to and through the messages they interpret from the situations. In fact, as humans we are compelled to make sense of situations; we are “hard wired” to do so (Nurius, 1993). When we cannot make sense of a situation, anomie confronts us head-on with the anxiety of being “at sea” or “groundless” (Yalom, 1980).

The Initial Schema

Members are compelled, then, to make sense of the group situation by themselves, on the basis of their own past experiences with groups and other situations that are “group like” (such as classmates or families). Research in the area of social cognition finds that people store and retrieve information in “packets” or organized structures that are called *schemas* (see Brower & Nurius, 1993; Cohen, 1981; Neisser, 1976). Schemas describe the ways in which we have learned to put together the social concepts and rules that we apply to particular situations. Our “group schemas” contain our understanding of the rules and concepts (i.e., norms for behavior, roles, expectations, etc.) that allow us to make sense of the group situation. This is not a new idea for small-group theorists: Garland, Jones, and Kolodney (1973) argued that group members make the new group understandable and predictable by drawing on past experiences that appear similar to the present situation. Again, this idea, that we make sense of situations on the basis of our own histories of experience, is basic to both constructivists and social constructionists.

But what is important here is that each member accesses his or her *own* schemas to make sense of the group situation, making the group understandable and predictable from his or her point of view. Each member perceives the group differently—reading different cues as im-

portant and assigning different meanings to these cues, reading the behaviors of the leaders and other members differently, and having idiosyncratic goals and expectations for what their group experience will bring. At the beginning of the group, then, each member has an understanding of the group that is different from that of other members (see Nye and Simonetta [1996] for research demonstrating how members’ initial schemas affect evaluations of their group experiences).

The First Reality Crisis: Turning to the Leader

The more experience the members have with groups of this sort, the more realistic and elaborate will be their group schemas. But because members need to interact, they are forced to violate one another’s schematic realities of the group and therefore confront the anomie inherent in the group situation. One might describe this as a “reality crisis,” because a member’s sense of the group is challenged by other members whose actions and behaviors are based on a different set of perceptions and beliefs about the group. Members may feel somewhat powerless and confused about the group.

This should not come as a surprise. In new situations, we should expect to feel confused and to turn to designated leaders who can help us through our initial confusion. Even though this situation might be considered a reality crisis, it is a relatively minor crisis in terms of its disruptive power for members. A powerful social rule begins to operate, that is, the leader will explain the rules and provide guidelines. In the language of constructivism, the leader describes the “reality” for the group. We have ample experience with the validity of this rule: The designated leader—in classrooms, families, work groups, and the like—sets the agenda, establishes the rules and behavioral norms, and provides the “vision” to help members come together.

To the extent that the leader provides an adequate vision for members, the level of anxiety caused by anomie is reduced (Bednar & Battersby, 1976; Evensen & Bednar, 1978; Lee & Bednar, 1977; Nye & Forsyth, 1991). A power differential is therefore highlighted in this early group stage, a concept typically described in the

group-development literature as the “dependency” or “orientation” phase (see Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 1994). As this stage, the leader’s vision for the group shapes the members’ vision. Or in the language of constructivism, at this early stage in the group the leader’s group schemas shape the group members’ schemas.

The Second Reality Crisis: Turning to the Self

This stage is often short-lived in groups. Members usually begin to question the vision of the leader when they become comfortable speaking their minds. Moreover, members’ goals and expectations for themselves and for others are almost always more complex than those prescribed by the leader (Nye & Forsyth, 1991). Challenges to the leader and to one another ensue. The group-development literature refers to this phenomenon as the “rebellion” or “storming” stage (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 1994). From a constructivist view, this stage can be seen as the point at which the members seriously question the schemas of the leader and of other members and begin to assert their own (Brower, 1986; Wheelan & Johnson, 1996).

This might be seen as a second reality crisis for members in that it often represents a critical point in their decision to stay in the group given the challenges to their construction of group reality. At this point, members face the decision to become a real group with shared understandings of themselves and one another.

Whereas the response to the first reality crisis is well-practiced (i.e., look to the leader for direction), the response to this crisis is less so. Members have three options in responding to this reality crisis (see Brower, 1989).

- *Members can drop out.* Faced with the realization that the group reality does not match their own schemas of the group, members may decide it is not worth the effort and drop out of the group. In a sense, members who choose this option decide to hold onto their own group schemas rather than engage in the development of shared schemas.

- *Members can “freak out.”* Faced with the realization that their schemas do not match the

schemas of other members, some members may abandon their own schemas entirely. Leiberman, Yalom, and Miles (1973) describe this phenomenon as a casualty of encounter groups, whereby members who are challenged in the group decompensate and begin to question the reality of everything in their lives. The anomie of the group initiates an avalanche of uncertainty that engulfs them.

- *Members can negotiate.* Rather than remain rigidly wedded to their initial group schemas or question everything in their lives, members can take a position between these extremes. These members remain grounded in their beliefs about themselves, others, and the world while loosening their adherence to their initial group schemas. They can engage in the situational anomie of the group without becoming engulfed by it. These members will feel anxiety as a result of the group being as yet “unformed” but will feel enough commitment to the group or members to begin to work through their anxiety.

Assuming that this third choice is the most functional for members (in the sense of being the option that enables them to form into a group), then their task becomes determining how to reevaluate their own goals and roles within this group. They ask themselves, “What am I doing here and what is it I want from this group?” Members begin to see what the group has to offer them and, within this frame, begin to examine what they hope to gain from it and contribute to it.

This “turning to themselves” has been reported in research on personal construct theory (PCT) applications in groups. Johnson and Neimeyer (1996) found that the only group constructs that members are able to describe at this stage are those that are attached to themselves. Members turn to themselves first—literally center themselves first—within their burgeoning group schemas.

Developing Shared Schemas

Starting with their own role or sense of self within the group, members begin to develop and negotiate other aspects of their shared schemas for the group. This process began with members placing themselves within shared

group schemas and developing their sense of self by exhibiting consistent patterns for their own behavior within the group (Patterson, 1996). The next step in the process is to negotiate shared understandings of basic rules or norms for behavior, that is, setting boundaries for membership in the group (Mullen, Rozell, & Anthony, 1996) and determining basic rules for acceptable group behavior, for example, being on time, amount of time each member should talk, acceptable topics for discussion (see Patterson, 1996). Finally members begin to recognize one another's behavior and roles within the group and begin to expect and count on particular members for certain types of contributions (Johnson & Neimeyer, 1996).

From a PCT perspective, after members begin to develop their sense of self, they begin to develop shared group schemas by first establishing the "constructs" (the dimensions of behavior considered important in their judgments of one another) and then establishing the "roles" (how members are perceived by one another). For example, Huici (1980) found that after a two-hour group exposure, group members began to use similar constructs in their descriptions of one another. Moreover, these constructs were highly appropriate to the specific group setting, which was a "t-group" experience: Members' constructs focused on interpersonal characteristics, were not judgmental, and were explicitly interactive. Other research using similar PCT methodologies found that members' perceptions of one another began to coalesce after the first few sessions (Johnson & Neimeyer, 1996; Neimeyer & Merluzzi, 1982). In these studies, members began to exhibit more consensual "role" rating of one another by the sixth and eighth sessions, respectively.

At this stage of group development when members are developing shared schemas, members elicit feedback from and give feedback to one another. Group goals, roles, and structures of power, intimacy, and communication are developed on the basis of observations of behavior within the group and analysis of their shared experiences together. This phenomenon has been described as the "norming" or "trust and structure" phase of group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Wheelan, 1994).

The development of the components of these shared schemas continues until members' anomie is reduced and the group becomes understandable and predictable for members. At this point, members will have established a shared perception and reality of their group, enabling them to focus more directly on the work before them (i.e., their shared purpose and reason for being together). Interestingly, at this point in the group, members switch from an egocentric to a sociocentric posture, whereby they use cognitive and affective strategies in dealing with the group similar to those they use in dealing with themselves (Forsyth & Kelley, 1996). At this point in the group's development, members can be said to extend their ego boundaries to the boundaries of the group (Nye & Brower, 1996a).

The group is now in position to take advantage of several constructivist interventions that can help individual members in their personal-change process. Throughout the group's remaining life, elements of the shared schemas will continue to be renegotiated as members confront problems and misunderstandings that arise during their time together.

Clinical Applications and Guidelines

Utility of a Constructivism Framework

In order to use constructivist techniques in groups, the group itself must be at the right "place." Members must have the language, concepts, and awareness of their own perceptions and social meaning-making mechanisms to allow them to talk about and process interventions directed at their constructivist processes. If a group worker uses a constructivist framework to analyze and provide feedback to members' behaviors and interactions, constructivist language and concepts will become part of the group lexicon.

In fact, several practitioners have found that a constructivist framework is extremely useful for helping their group clients make changes in their lives. Neimeyer and Neimeyer (1987) present several examples of the use of PCT in groups (see also Alexander & Follette, 1987; Button, 1987; Llewelyn & Dunnett, 1987; G. J. Neimeyer, 1987). Balgopal and Vassil

(1983) present lengthy illustrations of the use of an "ecological" perspective, which Franklin (1995) terms social constructionism. Brower (1989) describes how social cognition theory, falling under what Franklin considers constructivism, can be used in a group setting. Each of these practitioners found that the use of a constructivist framework and lexicon helped their clients achieve insights into their interactive patterns and characteristic styles of processing information about themselves and the world. This framework has worked well in groups as diverse as those for general psychotherapy (Balgopal & Vassil, 1983; Brower, 1989), eating disorders (Button, 1987), incest (Alexander & Follette, 1987), and marital couples (G. J. Neimeyer, 1987).

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to present an exhaustive examination of the application of constructivism in groups, several implications of the group-development model presented here can be outlined. First, according to the model, two crisis points are associated with members' commitment to the group. By recognizing these points, the leader can provide structure and guidance to modulate the anxiety that these crises generate. With the first crisis, the group needs direct guidance from the leader, such as providing pregroup orientations and presenting clear guidelines for attendance or turn-taking. With the second crisis, the leader's power needs to be redistributed (sharing agenda-setting responsibilities and renegotiating group norms) to the members to facilitate their development of shared group schemas. This initial structure and assistance can be implemented in a manner that is consistent with the group's goals and structure. The initial match between members' initial schemas and the group setting greatly influences whether members stay with the group. Although it is impossible to provide them with a vision of the group that will endure much beyond the initial sessions (given that the group is not really a group until the members make it so), it is desirable to help members access schemas that are compatible with the intended group goals and format. Nye and colleagues (Nye & Forsyth, 1991; Nye & Simonetta, 1996) and Bednar and associates (Bednar &

Battersby, 1976; Evensen & Bednar, 1978; Lee & Bednar, 1977) provide guidance in this area. Again, good pregroup orientation meetings and clear guidance in early meetings on group norms and rules are needed to help potential members develop compatible initial group schemas (i.e., compatible expectations of the group and leader).

Second, according to the model, a sense of anomie is inevitable in groups. Merton (1957) suggests that this phenomenon helps create an ideal setting from which life changes can be made. He outlines four ways of adapting to anomie (his definition of anomie consists of disparity between means and ends in society): *innovation*, holding on to the ends while developing new means to achieve them; *ritualization*, holding onto the means while losing sight of the ends; *retreat*, letting go of both the means and ends without substituting others, and *rebellion*, adopting new means and ends in opposition to society. From a group worker's perspective, these styles of adaptation to anomie can be encouraged or manipulated for members, depending on the goals of the group. For example, in many behavioral-change groups, innovation is fostered by highlighting (and therefore solidifying) goals, or ends, for clients while helping them find new ways to achieve them. In social-action groups in which empowerment is desired, active rebellion may be encouraged by helping clients realize alternative social goals and the means to achieve them. By recognizing the anomie inherent in the situation and by working with the processes by which clients adapt to it, the group worker is in position to make optimal use of the group modality.

Third, the language of constructivism and schemas can create a mindset for clients that facilitates change. Constructivist tenets and language state that life is a creative and constructive process as opposed to a corrective process (R. A. Neimeyer, 1993). Clients are therefore helped through constructivist language to recognize that they are doing the best they can, given what they know and perceive. At the same time, they are provided with the language to understand that the truth that they find in their lives is *their* truth and not *the* truth (Brower & Nurius, 1993).

Fourth, different clients exhibit different problems with living associated with different memory storage and retrieval elements (Brower & Nurius, 1993; Nurius, 1993). For example, one client might read a situation accurately—that is, perceive the right cues and put them together in a sensible way—yet lack a repertoire of functional responses for the situation. These clients might best be served through skills training that teaches flexibility of response. Another client, however, might respond appropriately but be inflexible in his or her activation of schemas; that is, the client may see all situations as being essentially the same. These clients do not need behavioral skills *per se* but need to be taught ways to read situations and interactions that incorporate social feedback into their constructivist processes (see Brower & Nurius, 1993; Mahoney, 1991).

Constructivist Techniques

Two constructivist techniques—narratives and role plays—are particularly well suited to a group modality.

Narrative

A lot has been written about the use of narrative in constructivist psychotherapy (R. A. Neimeyer, 1993, 1994). Rather than review this material here, the following discussion focuses on narrative in a group setting.

Narrative theory highlights the ways in which we use stories to make sense of events, to facilitate predictability, to find meaning, and to make choices. Clients are taught that narratives have a beginning (a historical context), a middle (the present situation), and an end (a hoped-for projection of ourselves into the future). Group members can be asked to keep journals in order to develop narratives about their lives outside the group. In this way, the use of narratives in groups becomes a simple analogue to the use of narratives in individual treatment.

I have found it useful for members to develop journal narratives specifically about their group experiences and feelings. When using this technique, I structure time into sessions during which members read portions of their entries to the group. Members begin to develop a story

about themselves in the group and about their group as a whole—a narrative that gives their group experience coherence, history, rules, myths, and meaning. This technique creates opportunities during early sessions for discussing miscommunications and experimenting with alternative roles and responses and during later sessions for deepening insight and mutual understanding. I have found that the use of narratives in groups greatly facilitates cohesion and group identity, which from a constructivist point of view stems from the group's explicit development of a shared group narrative.

Role Play

The group modality is an ideal medium for the practice of social roles and social understanding. From a PCT perspective, Llewelyn and Dunnett (1987) and Dunnett and Llewelyn (1988) provide excellent guidelines for role playing in group work. Their work consists of three main steps: (1) helping clients recognize the roles and constructs (schemas) they characteristically use in social interactions through self-reflection and feedback techniques in the group; (2) helping clients experiment with a larger repertoire of roles and constructs in the group, and (3) helping clients extend their experimentation to their outside lives through various group and homework exercises.

In the first step, members are encouraged to play out various interactions with others (initially those outside the group but eventually persons within the group), experimenting with different outcomes, emotions, and responses in order to highlight patterns. In the second step, members learn about their own roles and those of others in the group. Members are encouraged to select members for role plays in order to replicate various situations that they wish to work through (members are selected because their own natural roles and constructs are strategically close to those that the member hopes to practice). In the third step, members again select group members to practice situations and are encouraged to experiment with their new roles, constructs, and responses outside the group. In subsequent sessions, members role play with group members what happened during these outside experiments.

Llewelyn and Dunnnett's use of role play uses the social laboratory of groups to its fullest potential. Members are actively encouraged to draw parallels between their feelings, experiences, and behaviors inside and outside the group. Through the creative use of role plays, members use the group's real interactions and experiences as an analogue to experiment with interactions on the outside as well as bring the outside into the group as material for further experimentation.

Summary and Conclusion

Small groups are an ideal medium for the application of constructivist frameworks and techniques. They provide what Kelly (1955) has called a true "social laboratory" where socially constructed rules, roles, norms, and shared perceptions can emerge.

The model of group development presented here capitalizes on this constructivist perspective. It begins with a description of the group situation as anomic, or lacking external meaning. In the face of this, one enters the group having to rely on one's own group schema—one's best guess, based on prior group experiences, as to what the group means and how to behave. Then, for this group of individuals to

become a "real" group, members must develop a shared group schema—a shared understanding of the norms, rules, roles, and meaning of their actions and interactions. The process occurs in stages. Research in the areas of social cognition, schema development, and personal-construct theory describes these stages and the cognitive and affective processes active in each stage.

Using the language of constructivism to make sense of group interactions has been found to be very effective in helping members understand themselves and their group interactions. Moreover, the group worker has a certain leverage over the course of development based on how much and in what ways he or she structures the group experiences for the members. The model of group development described here outlines two specific "crisis points" that can be manipulated by the group worker in order to facilitate specific group and individual change. Finally, the use of narratives and role plays work well in the small group setting. It is my hope that the model of group development examined in this article and the discussion of techniques and applications that follow from such an examination will provide a springboard for further developments in the constructivism of *and* in small groups.

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