Psychotherapy Guidebook

Guided Group Interaction

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DEFINITION

Guided Group Interaction is a group-centered treatment program aimed at altering or modifying certain established behavior patterns of its members. The group is both the target and medium of change, since the development and processes of the group are thought to produce the change in the individual. The program is based on the assumption that the same group processes that inducted a person into a course of action and gave support to it can be used to free him from it and develop alternative modes of adaptation.

HISTORY

Although Guided Group Interaction is rooted in earlier forms of group treatment, its origins may be traced to a specialized method used among military personnel at Fort Knox Rehabilitation Center during World War II. Lloyd W. McCorkle, who had worked in this program, was brought to New Jersey by F. Lovell Bixby, Director of Correction and Parole, to organize group therapy in the state correctional system. Subsequently, he was appointed director of Highfields, a facility for sixteen-and seventeen-year-old male

delinquents, where the first full and integrated program of Guided Group Interaction was instituted at the former estate of Col. Charles Lindbergh near the town of Hopewell. A residential program, accommodating approximately twenty youths sent to Highfields as a condition of probation, was designed to include: a workday at a nearby state facility; two group interaction sessions each evening involving ten boys in each; visits to Hopewell for movies, haircuts, and small purchases; minor kitchen and housekeeping duties; periodic home furloughs; and release to regular probation after a period of four months or less, depending on progress made. Boys with prior institutional commitment, obvious psychiatric difficulties, or mental deficiencies were excluded as unsuitable for the program.

This program proved feasible and subsequently two other facilities for males and one for females were developed in the state and are still in operation. In addition, two experimental, nonresidential centers, now terminated, were conducted: one for sixteen- and seventeen-year-old males in urban Newark and the other for fourteen-and fifteen-year-old males, who received special education at a state teacher's college in lieu of a work program. In the late 1950s a facility called Pinehills, patterned after Highfields, was developed in Provo, Utah; in 1961, a similar program called Southfields was opened near Louisville, Kentucky; and in 1964 Silverlake began operation in Los Angeles, California. In addition to these residential centers, elements of the Guided Group Interaction technique have been

incorporated into a variety of correctional programs in some ten states in the United States, and in Sweden and Australia.

TECHNIQUE

Guided Group Interaction combines and extends elements of both group-centered and total milieu therapy. Traditional group therapy involving periodic group discussions is extended to include all activities of the group members. The milieu therapy model is extended to include the community by linking it to the program in order to avoid the structure of a "total institution." Guided Group Interaction differs from group psychotherapy in that the group rather than the individual is the focus of treatment. Although some informal, individual psychotherapy may take place as a by-product, the program is not organized to treat presumed psychopathologies or explore in depth the psychodynamics of individuals.

By examination and discussion in evening meetings of events prior to, as well as during, the program, each individual is expected to locate his "problem." Problems are anything that brought the person to the group and continue to inhibit playing an effective and satisfying role in it. Through daily interaction with and help from others in all phases of the program, each person is charged with making progress in handling his problem and helping others with theirs. All the activities of each person are involved in the

treatment process. What happens on the job, during meals, in leisure activity, while in the community, or during the course of informal interaction at any time are subjects for open discussion in the evening meetings. At the meetings, conceptions and attitudes that give rise to problems are challenged and analyzed. Alternatives and reasons for them are discussed and debated in sometimes heated exchange, where often for the first time, inner thoughts and feelings are expressed in a situation that links them to overt action. At the same time, the daily round of activities provides opportunity to test and practice insights and understandings acquired during the meetings.

Since each person is involved in seeking solutions to his own problems while helping others to solve theirs, all are involved in a collective therapeutic effort, and the group as a whole has responsibility for designing and carrying out its course of action. In the process, it is possible for the individual to be freed from group domination as he learns the dynamics of group interaction, as he is forced to recognize responsibility for his own behavior and its consequences for others, and as he is encouraged to develop confidence in self and respect for others. Each group develops a culture of its own, reflecting the characteristics of its members, the situation at the time, and the larger design of the program, which encourages innovation and flexibility in the absence of fixed, formal rules or regulations. The role of the staff is largely nondirective and consists of guiding the group toward self-sufficiency, through interpreting and questioning events and discussion in the meetings,

assuring that the group confronts individual and collective difficulties, and maintaining a focus on striving for realistic solutions that involve respect for self and others.

Evaluative research involving comparison with alternative correctional programs was part of the original design of the group programs in New Jersey, Utah, Kentucky, and California. The results of this research generally have not indicated marked superiority of this technique with respect to recidivism. However, they have demonstrated that: youths will participate in a community-centered, noncustodial setting without danger to themselves or others; those who complete the program are more successful than those who do not; completers are more successful after release than comparable releasees from reformatories; the volume of prior offenses diminishes after release; and the program seems to be particularly adaptable to boys with longer histories of delinquency, black youths, and those from lower socioeconomic strata who are often considered to be poor risks in delinquency treatment.