

# The Theory and Practice of Adlerian Group Counseling and Psychotherapy<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The group approach proposed here is part of a theoretical orientation that has been called Adlerian Counseling, Adlerian Psychology, Individual Psychology, and the teleoanalytic approach (Manaster & Corsini, 1982; Sweeney, 1989). Regardless of name, the approach extends from the original work of Alfred Adler (1931, 1957) and Rudolf Dreikurs (1953, 1960). Alfred Adler was the first psychiatrist of the modern era to use group methods in school-based community child-guidance centers (Turner & Pew, 1978). He began by counseling children and their parents in front of teachers from the Vienna schools. Later, his audience would include other parents and community members; open-forum family education centers were later developed based on this same model (Christensen, 1993; Dreikurs, Corsini, Lowe, & Sonstegard, 1959). Adler's psychology was *holistic*; his model required counselors and therapists to understand the human organism as a whole: a complete person living in a given context, at a specific time in history, within a distinct culture, and perceiving the world from the vantage points provided by heredity, birth order, and gender. In this sense, he was the first systemic therapist. To understand any individual necessitates knowing the person within the entire field in which he or she operates.

Adler also incorporated Vaihinger's (1968) notion of "fictions" into his theory of psychological motivation (Adler, 1959). Rejecting Freud's theory of drives (or instincts)<sup>2</sup>, Adler posited a human being who creates goals, both immediate and long-term, that motivate both behavior and development. These goals—especially the long-term ones—guide a person's movement toward an envisioned completion (or self-actualization) and sometimes even toward perfection. Since people rarely reach either completion or perfection, the goals were always fictions, pictures of personal fulfillment adopted "as if" they were absolute and true.

Adler's belief in human teleology was a radical departure from the "cause-and-effect" determinism of science at the beginning of the twentieth century. By the middle of the century, however, goal orientation had been confirmed in many areas. Bronowski's (1973) work highlighted the phenomenal

development over millions of years of the frontal lobes, those parts of the human brain used for problem solving, planning, and anticipating outcomes.

Since individual goal formation starts fairly early in life (Adler thought by the age of five or six [Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956]), relatively few people and situations influence the development of each person's goals and movement. Parents and family members (Gottman, 1997), socioeconomic status (Hart & Risley, 1995), peers, and educational experience seem to have the greatest impact. All of these, however, are subject to the creative interpretations of each individual. At the end of the twentieth century, Adler's socioteleological approach with its emphasis on personal hermeneutics provides a perfect foundation for group work.

Group counseling and psychotherapy in the strictest sense is a comparatively recent development. Gazda (1989) traces its origins to the early guidance movement started by Parsons around 1908 and notes that group dynamics really had its heyday in the 1970s. Group methods were not unknown, however, in remote ages. The Greek philosophers refer to the positive effects of group experiences (Copleston, 1959). Some evidence exists that Ethiopian priests used group approaches. Even the Marquis de Sade wrote and directed plays performed by his fellow inmates at the Charenton Mental Asylum, with therapeutic results noted (Corsini, 1957). Indeed, any time a political or social democracy emerges, group procedures begin to take form. Group counseling "is both the child and the midwife of democracy, requiring a society based on freedom and equality in order to flourish while at the same time perpetuating those ideals" (Sonstegard, Dreikurs, & Bitter, 1982, p. 508).

**By way of definition.** Within the teleoanalytic orientation, the processes of group psychotherapy and group counseling are very similar, particularly if adolescents and adults are the members. Where a distinction is required, psychotherapy is more complete and is directed at changing the members' faulty lifestyles or personalities. These groups are more common in hospitals and community agencies or clinics, where more discouraged and often disturbed clients are seen. Group counseling, on the other hand, does not endeavor to bring about changes in personality; rather, the focus is on the immediate situation, emphasizing self-concept and the discovery of personal motivation. Given this definition, group counseling is the treatment of choice for most adolescents and adults. It is the only useful group process with children whose goals are almost always immediate (Dreikurs, 1953, 1958), and therefore more easily discovered and modified or redirected. Motivation modification follows from the recognition that humans make mistakes and that mistaken notions and intentions sometimes need correcting. Since we are born in and live most of our lives in groups, this modality holds the most promise for reorientation.

When motivation is modified, behavior change occurs naturally. Indeed, a focus on the patterns and goals of the various group members often leads to changes in a whole range of behaviors. The unity of the personality guarantees that changes in motivation and behavior will be both internally consistent and contiguous (Adler, 1972). Any given behavior, therefore, is understood to be one manifestation of a complete life in movement. When human life is viewed holistically, an individual's behavior never becomes more important than the person.

### **The Theory behind Adlerian Group Process**

I have already noted that Adlerians maintain a socioteleological perspective: humans are social beings for whom every communication, behavior, and feeling has a purpose. Adler (1959) used the name Individual Psychology to emphasize this holism. The name was meant to denote the indivisibility of the person. Similar to the thinking of Polster (1995), Adlerians recognize that individuals have thinking processes, feelings and emotions, behavioral patterns, traits and characteristics, developing and fundamental selves, and definitive mental functions. Still, there is a person who is more than the sum of all of these, a unique being who interprets, chooses, creates, and moves in the real world, in real social contexts. This person sets personal goals, determines her or his own movement, expresses oneself differently in different situations, but consistently with one's past experiences, present attitudes, and anticipations about the future. This socioteleological perspective implies self-determination.

Neither consciousness nor awareness is required for most physical or psychological operations. Humans tend to function economically; they are consciously aware only of what they want or need to know. Indeed, nonconsciousness often facilitates a fluidity of movement. Since all abilities and faculties are in the service of personal intentions, the mind and body function together (Dreikurs, 1997); the ability to think and to feel are available without the requirement of consciousness.

Adler appears to have had a significant influence on Maslow (Hoffman, 1994). Their conceptualizations of motivational processes have some striking parallels. Maslow's (1987) hierarchy of needs suggests that the child first accounts for physiological necessities and safety. After that, a sense of belonging primarily motivates early behavior. In the process, self-esteem results and the individual is able to meet cognitive and aesthetic needs on the road to self-actualization.

Adler and Dreikurs differ slightly in emphasis on what motivates early childhood development. In the struggle to survive and meet basic physiological and safety needs, the child incurs inferiority feelings and seeks to

compensate, to overcome, to strive for a better position: this is Adler's position (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979). Dreikurs (1953) places a stronger emphasis on the need of the child to belong, especially within the family. In either case, human qualities develop as expressions of social living, as movement toward or away from others.

As people get older, the self-created, fictional, final goal of completion (self-actualization or perfection) unifies the personality and supersedes both compensation (striving for superiority) and the need to belong as the primary personal motivation. The value of one's life goal and pattern is determined by the degree to which it is infused with "community feeling" (Ansbacher, 1992) and the action line of community feeling, *social interest*. This feeling permits and stimulates a full social interaction.

Adler thought this feeling to be innate (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956, 1979). It was restricted only by self-absorption, exaggerated feelings of inferiority or superiority in relation to others, and fear of failure, all of which create doubt about one's place within the group. Instead of being free to participate in social groups, restricted individuals feel forced to defend themselves against a wide range of social demands. Maladjustment and dysfunction result from feeling discouraged in relation to others. Indeed, symptomatic behavior is often a safeguard against a loss of prestige, anticipated failure, or an open admission of antisocial or asocial intentions (Adler, 1996a, 1996b).

Self-deception about one's intentions is a normal human process. Awareness of our motives almost always leads to change. A nonconscious subjectivity supports incorporated life patterns and allows us to easily participate in social living. We need a biased apperception to move with conviction toward any goal. We are hermeneutic beings: our whole personality is based on our subjective interpretations of life. Each individual's basic concept of self in relation to the world, one's personal orientation toward social living, is expressed in a discernible pattern. It is this pattern that Adler (1931, 1957, 1959) called the *lifestyle*. Fundamental notions, convictions, and assumptions underlie the lifestyle pattern and form the *private logic* on which the person operates. The Adlerian counselor works with both the pattern and the logic which supports it in an effort to facilitate a more socially useful life.

### **Adlerian Groups: Process and Practice**

Group counseling differs in process depending on the orientation and theoretical formulations of the counselor. Many processes have proven useful (Corey, 1995, 1996; Corey & Corey, 1997; Yalom, 1995). Adlerian groups are characterized by a deliberate attempt to reorient faulty living patterns and instill a better understanding of the principles that stimulate useful

interactions and cooperation. This is most commonly implemented through a modification of mistaken motivations as well as the mistaken notions that each person develops and maintains. This constitutes *reorientation*, a change in a group member's attitude toward a present life situation and the problems that must be faced. In this sense, reorientation is an educational experience, a *reeducation* or *relearning*.

In Adlerian group work, learning follows from action; group participation is the necessary action for therapeutic effects. Participation may be either verbal or nonverbal in nature. What a member says is not nearly as important as the attention, presence, and awareness that the person brings to the group process. By attending to other members, the counselor-leader, and the process, even nonverbal participants may take some clarification of a problem away with them when they leave the group session. Further, Adlerian counselor-leaders tend to be active in initial group sessions, conducting psychological investigations, offering psychological disclosures, guiding group assessment and "feedback." These interventions can provide new insights—even for those who only listen. While participation in the broadest sense of the term, therefore, is required, verbal expression is never demanded of or forced from a group member.

Group techniques are more imperative in a democratic society where the authority of the individual is replaced by the authority of the group (Sonstegard, 1998). Even though we have had a political democracy for centuries, we have a long way to go in implementing a social democracy. The class system is still alive and functioning in the United States (Hart & Risley, 1995). We live in a society still struggling with the remnants of an aristocratic history: a high premium is placed on prestige. The group experience minimizes the requirement for and significance of self-elevation. The group experience attempts to eliminate vanity and the anxiety that people have about status. It helps to free a group member from the vertical movement in which she or he constantly measures self against others. Group process is about generating the respectful, cooperative, and useful social values required for democratic living.

Group counseling and psychotherapy must have structure. Because group process depends on member involvement and interaction, structure acts more as a guide for the counselor-leader than as necessary stages. Modeling and a liberal use of open questions are the single most important procedures for guiding and implementing structure. Adlerian group counselors seek to (1) establish and maintain a group relationship; (2) examine the patterns and purposes of group members' actions or behaviors; (3) disclose to individuals the goals pursued and the private logic that supports them; and (4) implement a reorientation that may increase one's community feeling and social interest.

**Relationship.** Neither democracy nor social equality rest on the assumption of “sameness” (Dreikurs, 1971). Each person in the group will be different from the others, and the leader will be different from the participants, hopefully in especially significant ways. What democracy and social equality do require is mutual respect and involvement. Effective groups are not characterized by members who do whatever they please: this is only chaos and sometimes anarchy. Groups, like democratic countries, rely on skilled, firm, but kind leadership. The best leadership happens when those people with more experience and a sense of democratic process guide those with less experience. This kind of leadership is most often accomplished through modeling.

Relationship is more than the establishment of contact and rapport, although these are very important functions (Sonstegard, 1998). Group counselors must create an opportunity for voice (Gilligan, 1982) without imposing the requirement of voice; groups will naturally develop an atmosphere for *connected knowing* (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996) when the counselor-leader attends to the development of each person's voice. This process also supports the development of common tasks to which the group leader must win the cooperation of the participants. Group process facilitates cooperation and collaboration. Maintaining it requires constant vigilance.

Social connectedness is the common result of group counseling and therapy. As a member listens to someone else discuss a personal problem, a new understanding or awareness may be fostered in the listener. This is a phenomenon uniquely associated with group process. The one-to-one relationships of individual therapy often preclude listening without defensiveness. Similarly, when marital and family therapy sessions involve single units, each member tends to listen with the intent of maintaining a desired position in the relationship or system. Indeed, only those family models that employ group process (e.g., a reflecting team [Andersen, 1991] or Adlerian family counseling [Christensen, 1993]) are able to create a therapeutic “pause” in which real listening can occur. A bonding in shared experiences—or even shared difficulties—follows from identifying with others, understanding feelings, and accepting a diversity of ideas. In turn, this bonding leads to more participation and to universalization, the cementing element responsible for group cohesiveness.

**Psychological assessment.** Adlerian group counselors use any number of assessment techniques, most of which were developed as an implementation of Individual Psychology. I use the concept of assessment here because it implies an understanding of the whole as opposed to an analysis of parts. Indeed, with a socioteological perspective, any part of the assessment should

produce clues to each person's goals, purposes, and lifestyle. Adlerians have always relied on assessments of family constellation, birth order, early recollections, relational difficulties, dreams, and artwork to understand individual movement. More recent discoveries include a differential diagnosis based on "The Question" (see Dreikurs, 1997, pp. 165–168), an evaluation of body movement and personality priorities (Kefir, 1981; Schoenaker & Schoenaker, 1975) and remembered fairy tales or folk stories (J. R. Bitter, personal communication, January 7, 1998). Each of these lines of inquiry can reveal a group member's interpretations of self, life, and the world as well as any mistaken notions that may be connected to these interpretations.

The following group process illustrates the meaning that can emerge during a teleological assessment process. Lynn commented that she thought she could "be more effective and be getting more out of life." As group members asked her why she felt this way, she related some recurring dreams she had been having; in each one, she was little, and whether she was standing in front of her teacher, mother, or father, none of them were ever happy with her—no matter what she did.

The counselor asked Lynn if she could remember anything that happened when she was a little girl. Lynn offered several early recollections, one of which reported a time, at age 5, when she was asked to sing for her mother's friends; she opened her mouth, but nothing would come out. The counselor asked the group members what her memories might mean. When no possibilities were forthcoming, the counselor suggested that "perhaps Lynn was restricted in her activity to only those things she already knew would please others and would be certain to reflect favorably on her." Lynn listened carefully, but did not comment. Others disagreed with the counselor, saying that Lynn was much too independent, too poised and sure of herself. She was considered a leader, and she was "positively dynamic" in her pursuit of activities.

In a later session, however, Lynn talked about what the disclosure had meant to her: "I think it may be true. I do feel inclined to do only those things that please. I'm kind of concerned about my image, how I project myself. I would like to be less concerned about image, to do what is right regardless of how others feel."

Group counseling or psychotherapy with adolescents and adults can easily proceed from discussions initiated by group members. In the normal course of conversation, the leader will find many opportunities to develop a line of inquiry that can lead to psychological understanding. Children, on the other hand, often need a tighter focus.

Adlerians typically provide this focus in children's groups with an inquiry about mistaken goals (Dreikurs, 1940, 1941). Dreikurs' four goals (attention getting, power struggle, revenge, and assumed disability) and their recognition have been delineated elsewhere (Dreikurs, 1958; Dreikurs & Soltz,

1964). These goals account for most of childhood misbehavior, because they do not require conscious implementation. Bitter (1991) has suggested some conscious motivations of children as an enhancement of Dreikurs' four goals: his conscious motivations are self-elevation, getting, and avoidance.

While the counseling of children has typically occurred in family sessions, group sessions often provide a unique glimpse of the child's pattern with peers. In contrast to the limited interaction the counselor experiences when talking directly to a child, individually or in a family, the group provides an arena that showcases the child in action. Children may be able to act "properly" around adults, but much of the veneer the child uses to cover up is stripped away in a group setting.

The following example demonstrates the advantage of a group setting and illustrates the more conscious goal of self-elevation.

Jane was bright, and she could be charming. Most of her teachers felt she was a good student; she was assertive, but she never caused trouble. Gerald was in the same elementary classroom as Jane. He, too, was a bright person, but he was also known as one of the "disturbing elements" in the class. Both Jane and Gerald were in the same counseling group.

At the beginning of one group session, the counselor asked the group if another counselor could sit in on the group for one day. The group agreed, and Jane immediately invited the new counselor to sit next to her. Jane took the initiative and subtly began to belittle Gerald while she put herself in a favorable light. This disturbed Gerald, and he began to act up. The other boys took his lead and joined in. Jane had achieved her goal of self-elevation; she sat back with an expression that said, "see how bad they are, and how good I am?"

The counselor intervened in the boys' disruption by asking, "I wonder how many of you know what just happened in here?" The counselor and the co-counselor led a discussion that both disclosed Jane's purpose and indicated to the boys how easily they seemed to be drawn into the "bad-kid" trap.

Jane's technique, purpose, and pattern would never have been discovered in an individual or family counseling session. She would have been able to present herself in a positive light that would have gone unchallenged. Since no one was really complaining about Jane, it is only in the group setting that her process could be revealed.

**Awareness and psychological disclosure.** Human beings live in groups. They behave in social settings. It is in these settings that the patterns of one's life have meaning. In private, a person can maintain any set of beliefs or convictions, no matter how at odds they are with the general perceptions of others. In private, what one says or believes and what one does may have no relation whatsoever. In groups, however, members pay more attention to what a person does, and incongruencies in declaration and behavior will be



challenged. Adlerian counselors believe that any real change must start with awareness. Awareness—of which insight is only one part, one example (Polster, 1995; Polster & Polster, 1973)—elevates that which is out of awareness, nonconscious, or unconscious (we use these terms interchangeably) to a new level of clarity, focus, and understanding. Such awareness is generally not enough in and of itself to foster change, but it is a necessary start.

Awareness is facilitated in groups at several levels. Counselors or therapists may suggest motivations and patterns through psychological disclosures (Dreikurs, 1967). The psychological disclosures discussed with one member may have meaning to others who are “just listening.” Group members may offer feedback. A group assessment of interactions right in the group may also lead to new understandings.

In individual therapy, awareness and insight often depend on the relationship with and skill of the therapist. In groups, awareness is regularly achieved through peer response and support. The statements and opinions of group members can easily carry more weight than anything the counselor might say. There is less resistance when feedback comes from peers—especially in adolescent and adult groups. A group consensus carries a powerful impact in respectful confrontation as well as encouragement for change. Further, even difficult awarenesses, when they are shared by others, can be received with less of a burden: a sense of commonality normalizes the meaning of experience.

A sixth-grade girl recognized herself in the narrative of another group member. When asked for feedback, she said, “I am like Jennifer too. I am always helping the teacher, anticipating the right thing to do, and being good. I do this at home, in school, even when I am just hanging out, not because I want to, but because I want to get in good. I worry all the time about people thinking bad things about me.” This response from a group member serves both people well. It tells the first member, around whom the original discussion occurred, that she is not alone, that someone else feels the same way. It also leads to bonding and to an alternative “expert” resource in the pursuit of change.

Regardless of the origin of psychological understanding, the reactions of group members make *the* significant difference in whether awareness, insight, and redirection are achieved. Nothing a counselor might offer is likely to stick if group members find no validity in it. Group members accept interventions from each other because they feel that a certain equality exists among them. Counselor interventions gain corrective influence only when the active support of the group has been won.

In a Parent “C” group, a father indicated that neither he nor his wife could get their son, Ben, to come home after school to change clothes before going out to play. The child had been spanked, had privileges removed, and nothing had

worked. In exasperation, the father had told Ben that the next time he went to play with his friends without first coming to change, "I am going to take your model airplanes down and trample them."

Another parent almost shouted: "You can't do that! That's just mean."

Still another parent suggested that there might be a good reason for Ben's behavior: "I know my son would not like to be left out of his friends' activities just because of this rule about changing clothes."

The counselor inquired: "What do you think of that?"

The father: "I hadn't thought of it that way before, but it makes some sense. Ben has been having some trouble making friends."

Another group member: "You can't control your son at this age—maybe not any age. Why don't you discuss the problem with your son?"

Still another: "What's more important to you? A son with friends or a tidy room?" (For more information on Parent "C" Groups, see Dinkmeyer, Carlson, & Dinkmeyer, 1994.)

There are a number of ways in which the counselor-leader gains influence in the group, most of which will be discussed later. Psychological disclosure is an area of special concern. If handled badly, counselor-initiated psychological disclosure can interrupt or derail group process and can engender group resistance.

A psychological disclosure does not even have to be wrong to be ineffective: pre-mature disclosures fail because the foundation for receiving them has not been laid. Dreikurs and other well-known Adlerians became so skilled in *demonstrations* at quick assessments and pinpoint disclosures that it was easy to assume that faster was better. In most cases, however, a group counselor or therapist is far better off asking group members to think about and discuss possible motivations and patterns in each other. It is not uncommon for a group member to provide some real insight; then, the counselor need only affirm it: "I was watching you as people offered ideas, and it seems to me that Amy's point really hit home with you."

Counselor disclosures are required when contributions from group members fail to make essential meaning. In the early sessions of a group, the ideas and comments of group members are often projections of what is happening with or motivating the speaker: these contributions are worth noting for their projective value, but may not prove helpful to the member who is the focus of the discussion.

While it is important for counselor-leaders to start forming teleological hypotheses about the group members as soon as possible, experience suggests that it is wise to collect many examples, to look for repeated patterns, and to even see the pattern enacted in the group before offering a disclosure. Even then, Adlerians have long enacted the disclosure/confrontation process *tentatively*, seeking to maintain mutual respect from the leader position, a

position the group initially views as having more authority or power. After listening to everyone's ideas, a counselor might use some version of Dreikurs' (1967) disclosure process:

"I have an idea that is somewhat different from what has been offered. Would you like to hear it?"

Disclosure options start with:

"Perhaps . . ."

"Could it be . . ."

"I get the impression that . . ."

The beauty of this process is that it leaves group members free to consider without feeling that an expert has given the final word. If it fits, the group often responds with statements that indicate and affirm a new understanding. When it does not fit, the group almost always searches for a more accurate interpretation. In either case, the group has been oriented toward a psychological understanding as opposed to merely a social one.

Counselors who engage in psychological disclosure are always taking a *necessary* risk. Credibility with a group does go up and down depending on the accuracy and acceptance of the interpretations. Timing and balance are also important attributes for leaders to develop. Too many counselor disclosures in a session will lessen impact. Offering none in a discussion of a difficult issue can foster confusion and chaos. The leader's risk of being wrong, or simply inaccurate in language, goes down when she or he has gathered sufficient examples as data, when other group members have offered their opinions, or when interaction in the group has already confirmed the leader's hypothesis: still, disclosure is a risk.

**Reorientation.** Reorientation and reeducation are the end points of Adlerian counseling and psychotherapy. Adlerian group counseling with children is designed to redirect the mistaken goals of members. Adlerian group counseling and therapy with adolescents and adults seeks to aid members in giving up erroneous concepts about self, life, and dealings with others. Parents and teachers receive help in understanding their motivations with children and in finding more effective methods for influencing the immature. Indeed, when parents and teachers change their approach, children's relationships with siblings, peers, and adults in general improve. The group is able to cultivate these changes because of the focus on motivation modification as opposed to behavior change.

In the actions and interactions of group members, goals and intentions are expressed; personal social orientations are demonstrated. Adlerians tend to stay with this interactional, systemic focus. Looking for an intrapsychic

and unconscious psychological process in children and many adults is not necessary and usually detrimental. Real problems exist in the social fields in which individuals operate. Purpose is more often revealed in the consequences of action than in introspection.

Many people—especially children—feel alone. Children who experience social isolation also tend to develop negative self-concepts that no amount of adult effort can eliminate. Group process stands in opposition to this situation. Through participation, it seeks to increase one's receptiveness to different ideas; to new facts, concepts, or experiences; to an acceptance of value previously foreign to one's thinking.

"Since this is the last day of our group this school year, I thought I would tell you about a conversation I had with my mother. I told her that I didn't think I was stupid anymore. When she asked why I said that, I told her that all of you seemed to think I was smart. Before I joined this group, I thought I was dumb. My mother didn't think that, but they have to like you. None of you actually have to listen to me, but you do, and you seem to mean it."

The nature of personal deficiencies and perceived failures makes *encouragement* the essential factor in all corrective endeavors (see Dinkmeyer & Dreikurs, 1963). When people feel inferior, they lose a sense of place in the community. A competitive culture augments the danger of not measuring up to what society demands; this is especially noticeable in schools where parents, teachers, and even peers increasingly pressure children to achieve at higher levels. A profoundly discouraged individual requires reassurance in almost every counseling session. This may be accomplished deliberately or as a by-product of the session itself. The success of the group counselor depends to a large extent on his or her ability to encourage. A perfect session, to me, would be one that worked continuously from an encouraging orientation.

Reorientation and reeducation require a restoration of faith in the group members: faith in themselves and each other, a realization of personal strengths and abilities, a sense of dignity and worth. Change is facilitated by the emergence of hope: by seeing that there are options, that different approaches have worked for others, that life can work out well (optimism). Faith and hope contradict the negative social influences to which people are exposed every day.

Peer encouragement often plays the most significant role in reorientation. Group members impact each other in a myriad of ways: by "being straight" with each other, by creating options and generating new solutions, by acknowledging and appreciating strengths in others, by celebrating accomplishments. Participating in a group almost automatically evokes mutual help. The group is also a place in which individuals can try out new

behaviors and new approaches. Through role-playing or direct experience, members are able to test themselves.

Perhaps the greatest encouragement comes from feeling that one has found a place in the group—that in spite of differences, each person can be accepted. Under the guidance of the counselor-leader, members learn to cope, to confront and address difficulties and disagreements, to resolve issues. In most instances, this new sense of belonging translates into positive interactions in other parts of life (e.g., the home, work, or the school).

Reorientation and encouragement increase the self-confidence of group members, permitting them to act more decisively, deliberately, and candidly. Confidence that extends from encouragement is never a conceit. It is not a compensation for perceived inferiority. It follows from the conviction that one is worthwhile and cannot be replaced, that others need us, “that you are acting well, and that you are a fellow [hu]man and a true friend” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1978, p. 125).

### **The Logistics of Group Process**

In this section, I take up the nitty-gritty of Adlerian group counseling: those areas less defined by theory and research but which must be addressed when forming a group and getting it started. These areas include selection of group members, group composition, group size, group setting, length and frequency of sessions. In most of these areas, research is either nonexistent or inconclusive with regard to effectiveness. Nor does Adlerian theory or accepted practice define these parameters. The best I can offer is a glimpse of the process I use when addressing each of these areas.

**Selection of group members.** Groups may be formed in any number of ways. Selection processes will differ from setting to setting based on the needs of the various situations. Some groups include members who feel they have little choice in whether to participate (e.g., court referrals of either first-time offenders or those on probation). Winning cooperation is typically more difficult in these circumstances, since resistance is high. The counselor must be patient and take the attitude that everyone has to be there, so they might as well get something out of it. Some groups are formed to meet specific needs: community agency groups to help people with depression, eating disorders, or psychosomatic problems, and groups in schools to help children with underachievement are all examples. These groups build cohesiveness based on a shared difficulty, and the leader will have to invest some energy in helping the members use that commonality as a starting point

and not a final destination. Some groups may be formed to help essentially functional individuals achieve better relationships through group education; examples of such educational groups include parent study, parent "C," *STEP*, and *Active Parenting* groups; open-forum family education groups; personal growth groups; and marriage enrichment groups. These groups tend to have standardized formats, and membership really depends on a good fit between the goals of the program and the goals of those who attend.

Schools are still one of the primary places in which group counseling occurs. Because groups tend to be more visible in a school setting than individual sessions are, counselors often encounter more resistance from fellow colleagues. Teachers may resent that students leave class to participate in a group program, feeling that something is happening in the group that is beyond their control: secrecy can actually fuel this response. Or they may refer students to group counseling and decide the process is useless if they don't see immediate results. When principals and other administrators refer students, it is not uncommon for the group to consist only of those children who have become significant disturbances in the system.

In general, schools need to be won over to the value of group counseling. This process requires the counselor to become a known and useful entity within the school. A counselor who starts with individual sessions, while also developing effective consultation experiences with teachers and parents, will have less difficulty in winning support for a group-counseling program. From individual sessions, it is possible to ask schoolchildren if they would be willing to try a group experience. A small group can be enlarged by asking the youngsters to invite a friend or a classmate; such invitations also provide a measure of safety for the members in the initial sessions.

In general, heterogeneous groups tend to work better in most settings. Life is filled with diversity, and meeting that same diversity in groups makes the experience more real, and hence more useful. A homogeneous group, say in school, may be comprised of "all the people who have caused problems." These groups always start with the standard lines these people use to justify their behavior and blame everyone else. The counselor is then the only person who can ultimately challenge their mistaken notions. These same children in a more heterogeneous group will hear different perspectives from their peers, and the counselor will be able to demonstrate a willingness to incorporate this diversity without prejudice.

One of the first questions schoolchildren often ask is "Why are we having a group?" My answer: "We have found that when people have a chance to talk things over in groups, it usually helps."

"Why were we selected?"

"We would like everyone in school to have a place to talk things over, but

there are not enough counselors; so we invite those we feel can profit most from the group meetings."

Wattenburg (1953) was one of the first in the counseling profession to ask the question "Who needs counseling?"—and who will benefit from it. Almost twenty-five years later, Ohlsen (1977) suggested that this same question was germane to the process of forming a group. Today, pre-group screening and "preparation for group" meetings are close to required, encoded even in our professional standards (see Corey, 1996; Corey & Corey, 1997; Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1998; Yalom, 1995). Prescreening rests on the notion that only those individuals who will be successfully helped should participate in group counseling or therapy. While the intake procedures associated with pre-group meetings may provide excellent preparation for group members, the selection process itself fails to provide an opportunity for those who need it the most. The isolated, non-communicative, or disruptive can find real solutions to their problems only in a group setting; excluding them from group or devising a group of only homogeneous members does little to change dysfunctional patterns. All of us meet difficult people to varying degrees in everyday life. We cope, or we learn to cope. There is no greater need to be protected from difficult people in most group settings, since such settings are far better suited to the discovery of new coping strategies than life is.

A group functions more effectively if (a) no one is compelled to join and (b) no one who wishes to join is turned away. Refusing an individual the opportunity to become a group member is contrary to democratic premises (Sonstegard, 1998; Sonstegard, Dreikurs, & Bitter, 1982).

**Group composition.** Adlerians share the general sentiment of the helping professions that heterogeneous groups are more effective, especially in long-term therapy. Yalom (1995) suggests that homogeneity promotes cohesiveness, but that advantage and positive therapeutic outcomes are not necessarily the same:

*Homogeneous groups will jell more quickly, become more cohesive, offer more immediate support to group members, are better attended, have less conflict, and provide more rapid relief of symptoms. . . . The homogeneous group, in contrast to the heterogeneous group, has a tendency to remain at superficial levels and is a less effective medium for the altering of character structure (p. 255).*

Yalom's demarcation clearly indicates that homogeneity is more appropriate in group counseling than in group psychotherapy.<sup>3</sup> Homogeneous groups have been successfully conducted for underachievers, potential drop-

outs, and children with school problems; for couples and marital relationships; for first-time offenders and those on court-referred, probationary status; for substance and alcohol abusers; for people experiencing grief and loss; for post-traumatic stress sufferers; and for those with mild outpatient clinical disorders. In these groups, homogeneity of concern or issue seems to lessen the stigma that is too often attached to a given problem.

While Adlerians deny no one access to group counseling, several considerations are worth keeping in mind. Unless the group is designed to be gender-specific, it is advisable to have approximately an even number of men and women or boys and girls. Such an arrangement provides support for each gender within the group and allows for the development of equality between the sexes. Groups always mirror in some fashion the larger society in which we live, a society which is still largely sexist. Group counselors, therefore, have a special responsibility to make sure that women—and especially young girls—have an acknowledged and respected voice in the group process.

This same principle applies to a diversity of culture, ethnicity, creed, and socioeconomic level. Where possible, encouraging a balance in diversity and giving voice to that diversity is useful. When groups lead to mutual understanding, the promise of democracy is advanced. The structure of many communities and the institutions within them are all too often limited to a homogeneous culture, and groups in these communities will reflect that culture.

Too divergent an age range among children and adolescents should be avoided. While there is no evidence that a specific age range is better than others, personal clinical experience suggests that preschool and elementary school children do best with a maximum spread of three years. Adolescents and young adults seem to handle a spread of up to five years. Because development in youth is more compressed, children and adolescents who are closer in age have similar life experiences and often find it easier to relate to one another. Adults are often able to relate to people much younger than themselves, but find it hard to project their current experience more than a decade into the future.

Temperament and activity level have not been an issue for me in group composition. Extremely withdrawn children, for example, have been mixed in the same group with relatively aggressive, acting-out, or attention-getting youngsters with some advantages for everyone.

**Group size.** There is a general clinical perception that ten to twelve is the maximum limit for effectiveness, with eight members being a preferred number. Even at twelve members, Yalom (1995) has suggested that there is some loss of effectiveness for ongoing therapy groups. On the other hand, Adlerians have conducted group counseling sessions with more than thirty in



them and with some indications of effectiveness. The upper limit depends to a great extent on the skills and experience of the counselor, the amount of time available for group sessions, and to some extent, the nature and purpose of the group.

An ongoing, open group for first-time offenders and their parents was held in a juvenile court in St. Albans, West Virginia, from 1975 to 1977. These sessions were conducted with children and adolescents initially in an inner circle and with their parents in a nonparticipating outer circle. Halfway through the sessions, the circles reversed and the counselors ran a group session for parents with the children listening. These groups never had fewer than fifteen people in them, and frequently had in excess of thirty. In the eighteen months for which records were kept, only one first-time offender was arrested a second time, and both parents and children reported a better understanding of each other.

A lower limit on group size is determined by the need for group functioning. Yalom (1995) suggests that five is the lower limit for effective group process. Below that number, the sessions tend to become individual counseling or therapy with fellow clients watching. Five supports the minimum interaction and diversity of opinion necessary to support motivation modification and to provide peer encouragement for change and reorientation.

Educationally focused groups (e.g., parent study groups, family education centers [Christensen, 1993], *STEP* [Dinkmeyer & McKay, 1997], *Active Parenting* [Popkin, 1993]); psychodramatic groups (e.g., family reconstruction [Satir, Bitter, & Krestensen, 1988] and Adlerian social therapy [Schoenaker & Schoenaker, 1975]); and procedures developed for large groups (see Satir, 1983) have been successfully applied to sessions in which more than 100 people were in attendance. These groups shared certain commonalities: (a) almost all of the participants were adults, (b) all were functional and shared a common interest in the group process, and (c) all sought to improve their lives with new information and experiences.

**Group setting.** Atmosphere in a group counseling or therapy room is worth attending to. It can support and augment group process or distract. Some institutions simply cannot supply ideal space, but some minimum requirements are essential. These include (a) privacy; (b) reasonable control of outside noise, inside temperature, and lighting; and (c) the opportunity for participants to sit in a circle. Faced with crowded school conditions, I have held group counseling sessions in storage rooms, outside boiler rooms, on auditorium stages, and in isolated corridors, but these are not the places in which groups function best.

An ideal meeting room is carpeted, both for comfort and sound insulation. The lighting should be sufficient to allow everyone to see easily without

glare, and some access to outside light is always a plus. The chairs should be appropriate to the size of the participants as well as comfortable, but not so comfortable that members are encouraged to drift off. There should be a foot or two between chairs, and a minimum of four to five feet of space between the circle and the walls of the room. In addition to guaranteeing privacy (usually by a locked door), the group setting should be free from distractions—such as noise from intercoms, music, outside activities—free from heavy hallway and corridor traffic, and away from other group activities (e. g., gyms, shop classes, or band). I also try to avoid sitting around a table, although some of the newer round tables have been adequately designed for group work. Rectangular tables always make it difficult for group members to stay in contact with each other: someone or some set of people are always lost.

Many modern facilities in universities, community agencies, hospitals, training centers, and even some schools have observation rooms, most with one-way mirrors and/or video monitors. These facilities may be used by students and counselors or therapists-in-training, other colleagues, and even reflecting teams. When observers are involved, it is important for the counselor-leader to show the group members every part of the facilities in use, complete with an explanation of how the equipment works and is used. This disclosure includes introducing the group members to the people who will be engaged in either participatory or silent (nonparticipatory) observations. People make up what they suspect but do not know. Fully informed consent not only protects the individual members, but also reduces unnecessary anxiety in the group. In most cases, some kind of release from participants will be required.

There is always at least an initial distraction any time observation processes are employed. Most of this distraction disappears in a very short time. When the number of people observing is small, Yalom (1995) recommends, and I concur, that these people be seated in the group session room. It is important that the group know from the beginning the manner in which the observers will participate and that the observers adhere to that arrangement. Also, when observers are in the group room, their attendance must be as regular as that of the group leader.

**Frequency, length, and duration of group sessions.** As in so many other logistical areas of group process, the information related to time has produced scattered results. While many time-extended groups (e.g., “marathons,” week-end groups, week-long groups) have been used by Adlerians in the past, the popularity of these groups faded after the early 1970s (Yalom, 1995). Many groups in schools, community agencies, hospitals, and correctional facilities are open groups with a continuously changing membership. These groups require a certain flexibility in the leader and the group members, and

acknowledgment of session-to-session changes is important for smooth transitions. Closed groups are usually limited in a couple of ways: the membership is set at the beginning of the group session(s) and does not vary, and a specific number of sessions over a set number of weeks with a clear termination point is established. Closed groups may become a refuge from the demands of outside living, a place members come to count on for replenishment. It is also not uncommon for time, itself, to affect closed-group process.

In a closed group, setting an exact number of sessions of a specific duration with a clear termination point sets a boundary on the group experience. In the early session(s), presenting difficulties (i.e., problems, symptoms, dysfunctional coping, even disorders) may quickly diminish or disappear altogether. Group members, feeling that they have all the time in the world, will focus on building relationships and finding a place within the group. When the midpoint of the group sessions is reached, symptoms and problems may be reasserted in group as members sense they are running out of time. It is in this latter phase that the real psychological work of the group occurs and termination is effected.

The most common format for groups is weekly sessions happening over twelve to fourteen weeks for somewhere between one and two hours. Less than an hour: the group seldom has time to warm up and accomplish anything useful. More than two hours: fatigue sets in—for both the group members and the leader. In school settings, a semester is often used for the duration of a group. School administrators often try to limit groups to a single class period. This is generally enough for preschool and elementary school, but too short for middle school and high school: in these preadolescent and adolescent years, counselors should win support for groups extending over two class periods.

It is especially critical in schools to adhere to the time schedule. This supports a seriousness of effort in the group process and allows the rest of the school to meet the requirements of the day efficiently, without undue disruption. No group-counseling program in a school has survived without the support of teachers and other school administrators. Straying from agreements about time and frequency of meetings is one of the fastest ways to lose outside support.

### **The Role of the Group Counselor**

Counseling and psychotherapy are like few other vocations in which the *personhood* of the counselor is integral to the practice of the profession. To be effective as a group counselor, the leader must constantly develop *who* he or she is as well as *what* a group leader does. In the Adlerian approach, person and practice cannot be separated. This is not to indicate that only one

type of person with a singular approach can be a group leader. Indeed, a wide range of people and personalities can be successful. All of these people, however, have a tendency to share certain personal orientations and commitments to the work.

A number of authors have described the values, characteristics, and skills essential to the group counselor (Corey & Corey, 1997; Yalom, 1995) and to counselors and therapists in general (Corey & Corey, 1998; Mozdierz, Lisiecki, Bitter, & Williams, 1986; Satir, 1983). In the following paragraphs, I delineate many of these counselor attributes from an Adlerian perspective. Most of these descriptions directly parallel Adler's social imperatives, his *community feeling* and its action line *social interest* (Adler, 1938; Ansbacher, 1992; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979).

**Presence.** The group counselor must start by bringing all of his or her attention to people and the process in the group. Satir (1983) talks about using all of her senses to take people in, and this is as significant in group process as it is in family therapy. I find it useful to orient myself to the people and tasks at hand:

Who is sitting in the circle?

What do their faces say?

What stance do their bodies take?

Whose body posture is paired with whom?

How do people return a greeting?

With whom do people sit?

Who's talking to whom?

Do there appear to be alliances?

Do some people seem quiet, withdrawn, antagonistic, suspicious, or isolated?

All of these questions orient the leader toward an understanding of individuals and an initial tending of group process. They orient the counselor outward, away from self-concerns or performance issues, toward psychological contact.

Further, the group counselor must genuinely like people, feel comfortable in the company of others, bring an accepting presence to the process and enjoy mutual give and take (interaction), whether it be congenial or controversial. Where possible and appropriate, the counselor should communicate an appreciation for others. This stance allows counselors and therapists to be both firm and kind in their interpersonal relationships. The group leader must "be perceived by the other person(s) as trustworthy, as dependable or consistent in some deep sense" (Rogers, as cited in Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989, p. 119).

**Assertiveness and confidence.** While there is no specific personality type that a group counselor or therapist must be, it is difficult to visualize a shy or reticent person achieving any measure of success. Group counseling, especially as applied to children and teenagers, requires a certain degree of assertiveness. Assertiveness is different from being directive or controlling. It has to do with bringing an interested and involved presence to the group, talking in a clear and even voice, and communicating interest without defensiveness. It is a willingness to set limits and establish an order in the service of psychological freedom. It is being comfortable with leadership without an insistence on being the leader.

A useful assertiveness flows naturally from an integrated self-confidence, a confidence based on optimism. Group counselors must have faith in the process, in their ability to handle even difficult situations calmly and without fear of being tested, challenged, or defeated by others. The projection of such confidence is especially important when working with children, adolescents, discouraged members, and others who draw on the leader's strength for an initial sense of stability.

Certain internalizations rob counselors of their confidence and effectiveness. Confidence is often a matter of focus; it is easily lost in questions that run counter to a quality presence and psychological contact: "How am I doing?" "What will others think of me?" "Will I do as well as someone else?" "Am I doing group *the right way*?" A counselor can never live up to the standards involved in such self-scrutiny. It makes us like all those helpless creatures who get caught in our headlights on a dark road at night: we are immobilized, unable to assess the situation or to make adequate decisions. While a certain level of self-concern is common when first learning group leadership, even then it is useful to focus on the group by preprogramming very pragmatic internalizations—ask:

"With whom am I sharing this experience?"

"What interests me about them?"

"What do I need to do first?"

**Courage and risk.** Courage is usually the foundation for assertiveness and confidence. Group counselors always need the courage of their convictions. A note of caution must be introduced here because courage and conviction are not the same as *playing God*, imposing authority, or taking absolute positions. Conviction walks hand in hand with respect. Unless counselors have respect for themselves, they cannot expect the same from members of the group. A conviction in the soundness of group process leaves the counselor free to listen, allows the therapist to stay calm and relaxed while he or she observes the dynamics of group interaction and the verbal and nonverbal participation of group members.

The heart of Adlerian psychological interventions involves *guessing*, suggesting possible motivations or patterns that make sense out of the behaviors and experiences of individuals in the group. Adlerian counselors engage in *soft confrontations*, disclosures offered with respect and tentativeness. Still, every intervention, whether a reflection, question, clarification, or interpretation, involves a risk, the possibility of being wrong. The nature of group process requires the leader to intervene more often during initial sessions than in later ones. Again, early guidance and activating a group presence involves risk. And risk requires courage.

For the Adlerian approach to work, the group counselor must assume the responsibility of serving as a model, an interpreter, and a guiding agent in the psychological process of change. It is a role function to direct, when necessary, the group's interaction into meaningful channels, to an understanding of what is taking place. If a counselor fails to assume this role, an entire session can be spent in frivolous talk.

The counselor must bring to the process every mastered skill and rely on an educated intuition, sensing when to permit group members to proceed undirected in their explorations and when guidance is required. Asking the right question at the right moment is a skill that generally comes only with experience. In general, those questions that increase group interaction, make the general more specific, transform group discussions into psychological explorations, or reframe options and choices are the ones a leader seeks.

The goal for the Adlerian group counselor is *reasonable risk*. Before disclosing a motive, goal, or pattern, it is useful to have tested the possibility in several indirect ways. Does a motive or goal appear to be guiding the member's behavior in several different places, instances, or situations? Does the pattern of coping or living repeat itself over time? Does understanding a motivation or process help the leader to predict certain behaviors or actions in the group? If the counselor starts to form teleological hypotheses early and tests them regularly throughout the sessions, the accuracy of psychological disclosures is all but assured.

The courage to intervene follows from what Dreikurs (1970) called *the courage to be imperfect*: it is the courage to be wrong and admit error; to experience the disagreement of others; to reconsider and correct faulty impressions, interpretations, or the language of one's interventions. Group counselors can have this courage because of the democratic and egalitarian atmosphere generated in groups. The process of making a difference in members' lives does not depend on one person.

**Acceptance, interest, and caring.** Human beings spend a lot of time in systems and institutions permeated with criticism and authoritarian structures. Families, schools, religions, work settings, and local communities are

all too often prime examples of this harshness. Group counseling and therapy must always be the antidote to such negative experiences and situations. Adlerian group counselors seek to replace critical, negative judgments with an empathic understanding. Adler quoted an unidentified English author in describing his model for working with people: "To see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, to feel with the heart of another" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 42). The communication of empathic understanding lays a foundation for a feeling of acceptance in group members. In group, anything can be said, anything expressed, and someone, perhaps many, will be trying to listen and understand.

When group members live in or come from severely punishing environments and experiences, trust in the group as an alternative can be long in coming. I have personally worked slowly and carefully for more than a year to build a safe place of acceptance for adolescents who had been placed in a "school of last resort," a placement little more than a large detention center.

Acceptance, in an Adlerian sense, has many of the same properties as, but still differs from, *unconditional positive regard*, which even Rogers acknowledged could only be fully realized in theory (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989). There are many positions a group member will take, or many behaviors he or she will enact, that cannot be viewed as positive or useful. In the group session, the person is heard and does not lose a place in the group even when others express disagreement.

Children, adolescents, and discouraged individuals often have a difficult time separating a dislike for their actions from a dislike for them personally. The counselor's focus on understanding motivation makes it possible for these individuals to learn and grow without losing self-esteem or self-respect. Indeed, the counselor's interest expressed in teleological explorations eschews the critical assessments of "good, bad, right, wrong." The experience for the member is that someone cares, is interested in her or his well-being and welfare.

**Modeling and Collaboration.** All of the above must be natural and fully integrated parts of the counselor. The sensitivity, caring, interest, acceptance, confidence, and courage must be genuine, and to make a difference, they must be actively modeled. Constructive group process is more often *caught* from the group leader than taught. To the extent that group members feel the positive effects of the leader's interventions, they begin to use them with each other.

Group members also quickly sense whether the process is collaborative or leader centered. How the group starts and is maintained in the first few sessions sets the pattern for most of the rest of the group experience. If the leader's interventions are the only ones that count, group members quickly

stop participating. When group members' opinions and contributions are established as meaningful early in the process, however, the group generates a cohesiveness and openness that is otherwise impossible. Collaboration in groups is facilitated by noting interesting ideas or contributions, by asking what others think, by highlighting the impact that one member has on another, and by simply engaging members in group problem solving.

**Adaptability and a sense of humor.** Group process almost never progresses in a linear fashion. Like breathing, groups sometimes contract and sometimes expand. Sometimes there is a focused clarity, and sometimes useful avenues of investigation get lost in distraction. Sometimes groups must dedicate a certain seriousness of intent to their interactions only to later relieve that seriousness with humor. While openness and honesty are important, so are timing and tact.

Similarly, group leaders must sometimes "go with the flow" and sometimes redirect the process into more useful and productive activities. Adapting to the needs of the situation is essential in groups; once established as a group, members will always have more influence on process, direction, and movement than the leader. Leaders who are good at what systems therapists call *joining*—who participate in shared humor, who adapt, and who do not take themselves too seriously—generally fair better and have more stamina (Corey & Corey, 1997).

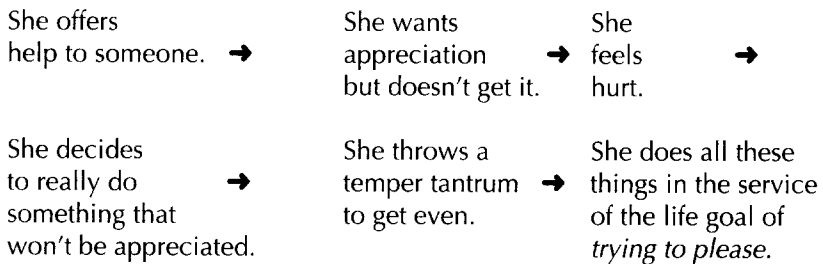
**Listening teleologically.** What distinguishes Adlerian group leaders from other counselors and therapists is a dedication to a psychological understanding of purpose and motive. Adlerians accept that any problem description is the individual's first attempt to make sense out of experience. "I can't talk to my parents" says something about feeling stuck and about the perceived inaccessibility of parents. Nothing corrective happens at this level. When the counselor asks for a specific example, the general description is transformed into an interaction. It is in the interaction that Adlerians discover motive or purpose. We ask: "What is gained by this interchange?" If there are few socially interactive accidents, then what was this interaction designed to elicit or accomplish? Very often, the reaction attained (relationally, emotionally, or behaviorally) was exactly what was sought.

A goal or a purpose makes sense out of what otherwise seems incomprehensible. Goals and purposes to which the individual attaches great significance lead to the development of patterns that both reinforce the motivation and its necessity in the person's life. Repeated patterns and motivation are always interwoven. Unlock one, and the other is merely a step away.



**Holism and working in patterns.** Adlerians believe that everything human is unified by the individual process of creating a life goal, an end point that envisions completion, fulfillment, actualization, and in some cases, perfection. Every thought, feeling, behavior, and interaction can be understood as contributing to a consistent life movement or pattern. Occasionally, separate observations seem diametrically opposed to each other—even paradoxical. Dreikurs (1966) taught Adlerians to view such distinct events as *two points on a line*. It is the line that reveals the pattern.

Let us say that we have a woman who *constantly helps others* on the one hand and *throws temper tantrums* on the other. What is the pattern? The line might be described in the following steps:



A motivation of wanting to please everyone makes sense out of all parts of her process. It also provides the counselor with a clue about how sensitive she might be to "being taken for granted," a lack of appreciation in the group. From a teleological perspective, Adlerians might guess that there will eventually be too many people to please in her life, and she will feel pulled apart. She may fear rejection; say "yes" when she wants to say "no" (placating), and change to meet the demands of others so often that she will lose a sense of her own identity. To paraphrase Gilligan (1982), she will need help to add herself to the list of people she hopes to please.

The group setting provides a forum in which disparate actions can be reported and investigated, in which purpose can be discovered and understood. Groups also support numerous interactions in which the pattern can be enacted as well as a place for a safe experimentation with new options and different approaches.

**Tending the group process.** Ultimately, the group counselor must believe in the usefulness and dependability of the group process. There are times when, as leader, the counselor will let a possible intervention pass in the service of building or maintaining the group. Sometimes modeling, member participation and involvement, group cohesiveness, and the establishment

of a democratic forum are more important than working with a particular individual. Letting an intervention pass, however, is not the same as losing track of people's personal and psychological needs. Leadership requires often instantaneous decisions about what can be pursued, developed, and completed in a session and what needs time and attention at a later date.

In general, Adlerian group counselors lead each session as if it were the last. While group members may initiate various interactions, leadership from the counselor is required if focus, new meanings or understandings, the generation of new possibilities, and closure are to be achieved.

### **Safeguards and Agreements in the Service of Group Process**

Every group develops a way of being that is expressed in normative behavior (Yalom, 1995). Most of the time, norms are generated within and through the interactions between the leader and the group members. These norms guide and limit group behaviors in the multiple situations that will arise during the various sessions. Norms can be unspoken and subliminal, or they can be addressed, clarified, and made manifest.

The more significant norms are often referred to as *group rules* or *ground rules* (Corey & Corey, 1997; Gazda, 1989; Yalom, 1995). I don't use this language in groups anymore, because it emanates from our autocratic and authoritarian heritage, reflecting an intent to control people by mandate. In a democratic society, we reach *agreements* with each other. Sometimes these agreements are important enough to codify in one form or another, because they save lives or help us avoid serious damage to self, others, or property (e.g., traffic codes).

While it has been noted that group leaders, by the nature of their experience and skill, have significant influence in the shaping of both a group culture and group norms (Yalom, 1995), an Adlerian leader can also choose to facilitate the development of group agreements in a manner that empowers members to initiate and establish necessary guidelines.

It is not uncommon for me to initiate a discussion of group agreements, but it is the group's responsibility to reach the agreements. The content developed by group members is always important and must be respected, but the process also brings the group together and establishes a foundation for a democratic atmosphere (see Sonstegard & Bitter, 1998). A typical set of agreements will protect the basic rights of individuals and enhance the flow of interaction among group members. To be effective, the number of agreements established should be rather small, and they should be stated and defined clearly.

A few agreements seem to surface more often than others. (A) Members may talk freely about anything they wish, but they must also respect the rights of others to talk freely. As far as I am concerned, this agreement includes the individual's *right not to talk* and not to be forced to talk. (B) All group discussions are confidential. It is wise to note that confidentiality is the avoidance of interactions outside the group that would either disclose names or group concerns in a manner that would hurt or embarrass other members. This agreement is different from keeping either the group or group discussion topics secret. It calls upon each member to do no harm, to use her or his moral judgment to keep the interests, welfare, and privacy of others safe. (C) Members agree to attend group sessions regularly. Needless to say, scheduled meeting times are required for implementation of this agreement. Group members may also discuss and reach agreements about frequency and length of group sessions, about what will happen if someone decides to leave the group, and about whether the group is open or closed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethics, as a discipline, used to address *virtue* and what constituted living a good life (see Aristotle, 1985, or Cicero, 1991). There have been a few good attempts from other fields at reintroducing this discussion into modern life (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985, 1991). Counseling and psychology are disciplines/professions directly related to human functioning and the human condition. And yet, they have developed *codes of ethics* (see Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 1998) that almost completely avoid topics related to *goodness*, *decency*, *value*, and *quality* in human life. Indeed, it is a stretch to call these documents "ethical codes" at all: they have become regulations for professional practice, designed, essentially, to avoid malpractice (see Austin, Moline, & Williams, 1990).

After the devastation of World War I, Adler (1938, 1957) introduced the concept of *gemeinschaftsgefuehl*: the feeling of being connected to all of humanity—past, present, and future—and to an interest in the welfare and interests of others. Adler believed that this connecting, community feeling was innate and that when developed, it would be expressed in an active, social interest. *Gemeinschaftsgefuehl* is the antidote to social isolation, self-absorption, undue personal concerns, and even mental and personality disorders. It enables courage, optimism, and ultimately confidence. People with social interest feel that they belong, that they have a place in this world and in the flow of history (Dreikurs, 1953). They have a sense of humor and cope with life's demands more evenly (Bitter & West, 1979).

Furtmuller (1979), in his 1946 essay on Adler, discusses the relationship of social interest to ethics and mental health:

[T]he concept of social interest itself changed in character. When Adler first introduced the idea into his theory, it was a biological fact, the preparedness of the individual from the first moments of his [sic] life to establish contacts, cooperating contacts, with other individuals. Now social interest became the mentally healthy direction for the innate striving toward perfection<sup>4</sup>—for the individual as well as for mankind as a whole. Adler was fully aware that by this new definition social interest has left the borders of biology and entered metaphysics.<sup>5</sup>

One reason that led Adler to this development was that undoubtedly it is impossible to be a psychotherapist without offering the patient some guidance based on ethical principles. The guidance may seemingly be completely away from ethics; for example: "Follow your drives without inner inhibitions, only be careful to avoid dangerous conflicts with established laws or customs." Such guidance may be based on ethical nihilism, but that is also a philosophy. For the Individual Psychologist it will be clear that guidance must lead along the path of cooperation.

But that was not all. Individual Psychology had shown that in neurosis all the different activities of the individual become directed toward one over-all goal—fantastic personal superiority. It was only natural that the treatment should invite the individual to change his neurotic goal into one leading to the "useful side of life." This was concurrent with the theoretical position of Individual Psychology, which always had put special accent on the teleological character of all psychic activity.

As an ethical principle, metaphysical social interest or related conceptions are at the root of many ethical systems and religious creeds. That the underdevelopment of the innate potentiality for social interest, largely because of compensatory reactions against inferiority feelings, leads away from mental health is an insight for which we are indebted to Adler alone. (pp. 388–389)

Anything that can be *used* can be *misused*. This applies to group process as well as most other activities in the helping professions. For more than twenty-five years, we have known that some group experiences can negatively affect participants, and that such a result is almost always directly related to the group leader's handling of group process (Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973). Gazda (1971) reported a case in which a group leader allowed an abusive situation, resulting in the psychotic decompensation of a group member. Group leadership founded on social interest and a teleological perspective largely precludes such misuse of group process.

Certain safeguards in Adlerian group counseling and therapy help to ensure ethical practice. While the leader listens to and acknowledges member contributions (thoughts, values, convictions, feelings, behaviors, and interactions), the focus is on the discovery of motivation and understanding personal lifestyle. One level of human expression is not elevated over

another; instead, the leader urges the group to see how everything fits together in a pattern.

With the exception of parent study groups and family education centers, advice and recommendations are not dispensed. Options are generated and considered, but it is up to each member to take what fits and let go of the rest.

A certain level of openness is required for groups to work, but members are encouraged to participate in their own way—even if that way is in silent listening. In general, group members might be encouraged to be somewhat more expressive (self-disclosing) than usual if the group feels safe, and to reflect upon the meaning of the experience afterward (Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973). Honesty is also important, but it must conform to the requirements of social interest, especially in relation to offering feedback: that is, honesty must be tempered with tact and timing.

When Adlerian group counselors or therapists engage in confrontation or offer a psychological disclosure, it always comes in the form of a supposition, prefaced with “Do you think perhaps . . .” “Could it be . . .” or “I get the impression that . . .” This tentativeness protects the group member from personal attack or extreme pressure as well as minimizes or eliminates any form of ego destruction. It also provides a model for mutual respect in an atmosphere of social equality.

I have already noted my opposition to pre-group screening procedures (although I have less concern with a pre-group meeting designed to inform potential members about the process and experience). Screening is antidemocratic on the face of it and predominantly serves to protect the inexperienced therapist.

The *Ethical Guidelines for Group Counselors* (Association for Specialists in Group Work, 1989) recommends screening (when it is accepted practice within a given theoretical model); this notation allows Adlerians to accept all people who seek voluntary entrance to the group. Unfortunately, when the American Counseling Association (1995) incorporated group work into its most recent code, no such theoretical exception was noted. Indeed, the codified standards specifically mandate screening, one purpose (among others) being to ensure that no member will impede group process. Hopefully, future revision of these standards will note a legitimate Adlerian objection to a screening process and will insert a notation regarding theory similar to that in the ASGW standards.

## **Conclusion**

Group counseling and psychotherapy is a mode of treatment almost ideally suited for the Adlerian approach. The Adlerian emphasis on understanding the individual within her or his social milieu is fully realized in a group

setting. In a group, members interact with peers living out the human experience. Differences in that living, whether personal or owing to culture or gender, create options for consideration and make the appreciation of uniqueness possible. Group acceptance (finding a place) is therapeutic in and of itself.

Further, the group is a means of gaining insight and understanding one's problems through direct intervention or by listening to the discussions of others. Personal actions or interactions, previously unacceptable to the individual, become understood, meaningful, and perhaps integrated. Learning makes change possible; the group is a safe place in which to try out new possibilities. In this sense, the group experience not only helps an individual member but evokes a desire in that member to help others. Groups invest social interaction with real meaning. With the guidance of an experienced leader, the group becomes an agent for the formation of positive (socially useful) values and norms.

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## Reference Notes

1. Parts of this article, including its structure, appeared in Sonstegard, Dreikurs, & Bitter (1982) in a substantially different form.
2. For a thorough presentation on Freud's theory of drives or instincts, see Gay (1989).
3. Here, the differentiation between group counseling and group psychotherapy is not intended to suggest a significant difference in process, practice, training, or skill level of the counselor/therapist. Rather, group counseling is designated for those who are more functional and need only redirection; group therapy is indicated for those who are more dysfunctional and in need of personality restructuring.
4. Another word for *perfection*, here, might be *completion* or *actualization*.
5. The Ansbachers' footnote to Furtmuller's text reads: "Adler used the term metaphysics in the sense of ontology, as basic assumptions about man" (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1979, p. 389).

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