



Group Dynamics

A Deep Dive into an Interpersonal Learning Environment

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For my students

– Group Dynamics –

A Deep Dive into the Interpersonal Learning Environment

Enrolling in the course: Is this right for you?
The first week: These are the only lectures
Introductory exercises

Getting into the LE
– the LE poem
LE Anxiety
BITG (bring it to group)

The fully functioning Process Group
Putting it in writing: Process notes
– the process group analysis sheet
Coming back for more: Student facilitators

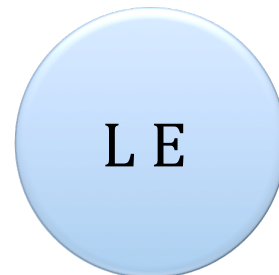
And let's not forget
– group boundaries,
– task vs socio-emotional leaders
– subgroups
– social microcosms
– are we a cult?

Evolution is hard
– intergroup conflict

The Task Group
– the group posters and photos
– a group's week titles and highlights
– the mottos of group members
– a group's analysis of their imaginary house
– an analysis of an imaginary group member

The afternoon classes
The documents folder
Perceptions of the Instructor
– the kidnapping

The final paper
– research methods in Group Dynamics
Saying good-bye
– group photos





During my forty years of teaching, the course that had the most powerful impact on students was Group Dynamics. I'm sure that students who took the class would agree. Here I will describe the concepts and teaching techniques that gave rise to the course and guided its evolution over the decades. I should also mention the student manual for group dynamics (available in my Collected Works) as an accompaniment to this monograph. The comprehensiveness of the manual and the many ideas provided here reflect the complexity of the course as well the importance of a thorough conceptual and practical framework to keep it running smoothly. As I told my students at the beginning of each semester, "The manual may seem complicated and overwhelming, but in two or three weeks all of this will flow very naturally for you."

Enrolling in the Course: Is this Right for You?

Students interested in taking the course first meet with me. I explain that Group Dynamics is not your typical course. It is highly experiential and not everyone's cup of tea. Meeting the student gave me the opportunity to ascertain whether they struck me as the kind of person who could benefit from the course, and not the kind of person who might feel very uncomfortable in it – or who might even disrupt it. The students read, discuss with me, and sign this informed consent that summarizes the course in a very concise nutshell:

Group Dynamics is designed for seniors and juniors who are planning a career in psychotherapy and counseling. These students will be given a priority in enrolling.

Group Dynamics is not a lecture style course. Instead it is much more experiential. Students learn about group dynamics by participating in groups. The class of 16 students is divided into two groups of 8.

During the semester, those two groups meet separately twice each week in a morning 1.5 hour lab period. One of those morning meetings is "task group" for carrying out various activities that I assign. I am not present during that meeting.

During the other lab period, your group meets in "process group" to discuss the personalities, relationships, and social-emotional processes within your group, to give feedback about how you are reacting to each other and to the group as a whole. I am present as a facilitator during the process group.

Facilitators who are students who previously took Group Dynamics attend and assist the group in both lab meetings.

During the afternoon class periods that follow the two morning labs, both groups meet together with me as a whole class for various discussions and activities, and for providing feedback to the other group.

You will learn about yourself – how you behave in groups, your thoughts and feelings in reaction to others, their thoughts and feelings in reaction to you. This can be an exciting learning experience. It also is a challenge. Sometimes it's not easy giving

feedback to people about how you react to them. Feedback from others about how they react to you might not be what you expected.

Conflict might come up in the groups, but conflict and resolving it is an important part of a group's life. Understanding conflict is an important part of a group dynamics course and life itself.

If you feel uncomfortable working in groups, with conflict, or talking about your reactions to other people and hearing their feedback about you, then this might not be the course for you.

Attendance and punctuality are crucial! It's very important that the groups remain stable in their membership. Students who tend to be absent or come late might experience problems with their group members. Points are deducted for excessive absences and tardiness.

Given the reputation and popularity of the course, many students who came to see me were highly motivated to enroll. It was the exception when someone decided against taking the class after learning what it entailed. It was even more rare for me to suggest to a student that the course might not be right for them, a suggestion that confirmed their own misgivings. Over the years, this initial meeting proved effective in recruiting students who would find Group Dynamics a valuable learning experience.

The First Week: These are the Only Lectures

Some experts in interpersonal learning groups believe that participants should immerse themselves into the experience without first being educated about how these groups work. I don't entirely agree. Although I understand their concern about people forming preconceptions that artificially shape their behavior in group, and about the possibility of some people trying to "defy the textbook," I believe it's helpful for students to have a conceptual framework for understanding how the group works and how they can benefit from it. I tell the students about my opinion in this debate. I tell them that my lectures on group dynamics in this first week would be the only lectures of the entire course, a fact most students do not mind.

During that first week, before the task and process groups begin, I lecture about the various concepts underlying the process group as *interpersonal learning environment*, what we call for short, the **LE**: self-disclosure and feedback; understanding the underlying socio-emotional processes of a group versus the content of group discussions; the self-reflective loop; the importance of maintaining group boundaries; the group as a social microcosm of life and even of one's family; Johari's window; and the stages of group development (norming, conforming, storming, performing, adjourning).

I describe the Group Dynamics course as an education in the research method known as "participant-observation." Similar to quantitative research, you are making objective observations of groups. But different than quantitative research, you are also participating

in the groups and therefore becoming a subject of your own research. You allow yourself to subjectively experience the group while also taking care to objectively understand your own personal reactions, often with the help of feedback from other group members. A good participant-observer learns how to identify and understand even their subtle subjective reactions. Your personal reactions are “data” to be examined and interpreted.

I tell the class about the different strategies for dividing the class into the two groups who meet for the remainder of the semester in their task and process group meetings. Some of the strategies don't work well. When seniors went to one group and juniors to the other, the juniors developed an unrealistic inferiority complex. Letting students choose their own groups is not just chaotic but also results in cliques and hurt feelings about being left out that later complicate the groups' development. Random assignment to the groups feels too haphazard, unpredictable and risky.

Instead, I tell them, the best option is for me and the facilitators to decide on the group membership based on a simple rule: make the groups as similar as possible in their heterogeneity, with each having some seniors and some juniors, some male and some female, some talkative people and some quiet people.

I ask students to let us know if they have any friends or roommates in the class, that having someone close to you in group is not a good idea. It creates the temptation to privately pair with that person, to talk with each other about group outside of group rather than in it, to protect each other and close down in group rather than self-disclose. The students accept this rationale, some even like it.

Introductory Exercises

During the first week we do a few exercises to get to know everyone in the whole class. These exercises are described in more detail in my book *Teaching Psychology: Concepts and Techniques for Experiential Learning* (available in my Collected Works at johnsuler.com) Insights into each other from these activities echo through the remainder of the course. We refer back to what we remember from these exercises:

– Dyad introductions

Students interview a partner, introduce their partner to the whole class, and talk about their reaction to how they were introduced

– Show-and-tell

The activity from kindergarten works very well for college students. They show and talk about items that are important to their identity.

– A group poster

In groups of four or five, students create a poster.

– *A whole class sociogram*

Based on relationships that existed prior to the class, students sit or stand near people who they know. The closer you feel to someone, the closer you physically place yourself to each other. The sociogram exercise reveals the patterns of friendships among students. I tell them that we will do this whole-class sociogram again at the end of the course, and that the patterns will change based on their experiences in the class.



Some Examples of Show-and-Tell Items

Three of his favorite rocks
Boxing glove signed by Arturo Gotti
Pictures with her grandmother and niece,
Stuffed lion her boyfriend gave her
Picture of her specialized unit in the Army
Picture of her father and her
Guardian angel clip from her godparents
Scrapbook of her travels
Football card featuring his son
Picture of his dog

Signed picture of his favorite bowler
Picture with her best friend and of her ferret
Shell he found while in the Bahamas
Picture of her mother and father together
Picture of her husband, son, and dog
Wooden box and amber from Turkey
Pictures of her best friend
Cactus from Arizona
Picture of her niece
Pimp Cup

For the group poster exercise, students from the whole class are randomly assigned to a group of four or five members. Usually not knowing each other very well, most groups create a poster where each member keeps to their own area of the board, as illustrated below. Occasionally, there are exceptions, as in this unusual carved-edge, scratch-off, blue poster. Later in the semester almost all task groups take the "one perspective" approach when creating the poster for their group.



Getting into the LE



Many students see the ideas in the introductory lectures as rather abstract and therefore distant. It isn't until the process group is underway that they begin to make the connection between the concepts and their experiences in group. Even a few weeks into the semester, which is the "norming stage" of group members trying to figure out how this process group works, many still feel puzzled about when they have actually entered this so-called LE.

In these first few process group meetings the students feel uneasy about my role in the group. They now realize what I meant when I said in the introductory lectures that I'm not the "professor" who leads the class. Rather, I am a facilitator, often quiet but occasionally offering questions or comments that help them self-disclose, talk about their reactions to each other, and understand the underlying socio-emotional processes of the group.

I might remind them of the questions they could address in these first few sessions. What do I want to get out of this experience? What do I want to learn about myself? Or simply, What's it like being here right now? In later sessions when the group is well underway, I might start off the meeting by asking who wants time to talk, then once underway make

sure that everyone who so indicated has their fair share of time. In the "performing" stage of a mature or fully functioning group, the group itself takes on these responsibilities.

To help the students understand what the LE is, in a way that was less academic and more casual, I wrote a poem that captures all the essential ingredients of the interpersonal learning environment that we try to create in the process group. Despite their anxieties about having to memorize it, I ask them to do just that so they can write it out in class:

The LE Poem

What is the LE?
It's feedback and disclosure,
which, simply put, means people get to know you.

Getting into the LE is not as hard as it seems,
talk about your family, friends, lovers, and dreams.
but that's not required,
those are things outside the group,
the most pure LE is what people do inside the group.

This is so important, recite this part loud!
to get into the LE
talk about what people are doing right here, right now!

This may lead to conflict
but remember that's OK!
It's part of the LE,
talk about it leads to cohesion one day.

The group is like a person,
it has a personality and moods.
Talk about these things
and that's the LE too!

Last but not least
you may recreate in group
your family, friends, triumphs, and strife,
and that's why we call it a microcosm of life

Talk about that! It's the LE! Hooray!
It's a lot more valuable than getting that "A" !



The second and third stanzas are important. In the introductory lectures I tell the students that the process group is NOT group psychotherapy. We're not assuming people will talk about their problems or that anyone has to change in anyway. We're not even expecting people to talk about anything concerning their life outside the group. But people are

welcome to do so, if they wish. Not sure what else to do, but motivated to self-disclose, some students choose that option, with the resulting discussion in which group members offer support and advice going quite well. The downside can be a chain reaction where group members assume everyone must take turns in talking about their problems in life.

The facilitator's job is to help the group see this hidden norm of a "confession session" or "I'll tell you my problems if you tell me yours" – and to remind the group that talking about one's problems in life isn't required. Instead, in the "pure LE," as I call it, we talk about what's happening inside the group itself, how people perceive and react to each other in group, the relationships that are forming in group, the underlying attitudes and emotions that influence the group.



LE Anxiety

The process group, the core of the group dynamics course, does not entail what we might consider normal conversation. It's not a group for "social loafing" – the chit-chat about whatever topics come to mind, as often happens in the social groups of everyday life. The process group is a working group. It entails working the LE. We might consider it "work" because it takes effort to be honest with people about what you're thinking and feeling about them, and to listen to their feedback about you.

The LE can make people uncomfortable, even anxious, because we're not used to it. When giving feedback and self-disclosing, you never know exactly what will happen and how people will react. Will you feel vulnerable, stupid, embarrassed, criticized, rejected, ignored? Will others like you? Even feedback and self-disclosing about positive things (like saying you like something about someone) can feel a little risky. How do people react to that anxiety? How do they sometimes try to avoid the LE? Here are the possibilities I describe in a handout for discussion in the afternoon class:

Social Loafing: People chit-chat about this and that, changing topics quickly, without focusing on anything in particular, especially the LE. Usually the topics are about things outside the group.

Changing the Subject: People may get into an LE topic but then someone changes the subject to a non-LE topic.

Dwelling on a Non-LE Topic: People dwell on a topic unrelated to the group that does not result in much of an LE. People who aren't interested in that topic get bored.

Silence: Some people are silent but listening carefully. Others are silent while doing various things to distract themselves from the LE. Still others seem to have no reaction at all, almost frozen, like a "deer caught in the headlights." Is there something on your mind but you decide not to talk, or has your mind gone blank?

Fusion: Especially in the Conforming Stage, people join or fuse together in a feeling of harmony and affection. The group wants to feel good and think everyone is good. There is a "don't rock the boat" attitude and a tendency to avoid the LE, especially if it might uncover any kind of conflict, including even small frictions between group members. People might feel a bit paranoid about the facilitators and perceive them as the instigator who wants to rock the boat.

Friending: Rather than work in the LE, people want to get to know each other and make friends in the usual way, like going out together to eat or drink. If friendships already are forming, people may want to avoid the LE because it's not the kind of thing that friends usually do. It may also stir up some friction among the friends (similar to fusion),

Pairing: A person forms an alliance with another group member. There may be an unspoken agreement not to give feedback to each other in group. They may talk about group outside of group rather than in group. They feel it's more important to protect the relationship than to explore the LE (similar to friending).

Fighting: People argue over one issue in order to avoid something else important that's going on in group. The group usually feels very uncomfortable and "stuck."

Looping: People dwell on the same issue to the point of feeling "We're beating a dead horse." This may indicate that something else is being overlooked about that particular topic or that people are avoiding other LE issues.

In group/Out group: The group loops by dwelling on negative feelings about the other group. This may be a way to avoid issues within one's own group.

Minimizing the LE: People hold onto the attitude that this is “just a course” and all that matters is the grade they get. They use that attitude as a way to avoid the LE.

Scapegoating: The group focuses on a particular member to avoid other LE issues.

Joking and Devaluing the LE: Some jokes about the LE are funny, but some people make a habit of joking about the LE or criticizing it. They might do this at just the moment in group when the LE starts to get underway.

Playing Dumb: The introductory lectures outlined how a process group and the LE work. In the group meetings and process notes, all sorts of important issues come up that people can bring to group. Yet some people say, “I don’t know how to get into the LE.”

Talking the Talk: People talk knowledgeably about the LE and state their interest in getting into it, but don’t actually walk the walk. They don’t actively seek it out.

Dependency: People look to the facilitator to “tell us what to do” or “tell us what’s happening.” Other forms of dependency include encouraging other people to talk and self-disclose rather than do that oneself, and not bringing any specific issues to group to discuss but relying on others to do that.

Absence, Tardiness: People miss group or come late as a way to avoid the LE

Given all these possible ways to avoid the LE, one may wonder how students get into it at all. I remind them that they enrolled in the course because they expressed an interest in learning about themselves. That's what the process group is all about. I tell them that they may never again in their life have the opportunity to participate in a group like this, so take advantage of it while you can. I tell them that at the end of the semester a common remark by past students is that they wished they had not social loafed as much, that they had gotten into the LE more. These reminders motivate many students. I also tell them that, "I can lead you to the LE, but I can't make you go in. That's up to you."



BITG (bring it to group)

To develop trust among group members, I emphasize that discussions in process group are confidential. The general rule of thumb is to talk about the group inside of the process group meeting rather than outside of it. More specifically, consider: (1) who are you talking to outside of group? (2) are you talking about your group as a whole or about a specific member of your group?

It might be OK to talk about the group in general with people who aren't in the course, but not OK when revealing what specific members said or did. Talking about your group as a whole with members who belong to the other group in the course might actually be a group thing, because I encourage the two groups to compare their experiences (that's one of the objectives of the afternoon class). But again, revealing to a member of the other group what a specific person said or did in your group is not OK. Sooner or later, the gossip chain will bring that breach of confidentiality back to the person whose privacy was violated, resulting in a conflict that could have been avoided.

I tell students to trust their intuition. If your gut feeling tells you not to say something about group outside of group, then don't do it.

Talking about what happened in group outside of the process group meeting tends to siphon off energy from the process group. It's often an unconscious way to let off steam without having to speak up in group, as in the "pairing" reaction to LE anxiety described previously. We want to bring energy TO group.

BITG: If you're thinking or feeling something about your fellow group members or the group as a whole, *bring it to group*. In fact, if there's anything about yourself that you would like to discuss with someone, BITG.

For the many students in the course planning on a career in counseling and psychotherapy, developing the professional maturity and wisdom regarding confidentiality is crucially important. I tell them that learning about this issue our Group Dynamics class is giving them a head start in their career.



The Fully Functioning Process Group

Everyone in the course knows that our collective goal is to help both of the two groups of students reach the "performing stage" in how their process group functions. I tell the students that this is what a typical process group meeting would look like when the group has reached that stage of development, that this is what we are striving to do achieve right now, as best we can:

1. Group members come on time
2. The group might chit-chat/social loaf for 5-10 minutes ("settling in")
3. The facilitator might ask who in the group would like time to talk, although anyone in the group might pose this question. Or people might on their own, without a prompt, say that they would like time to talk.
4. The group decides who among those people will talk first.
5. The group stays with that discussion until everyone feels finished or ready to move on to the next person.
6. The group tries to give everyone the time they want. If there isn't enough time for everyone, the people remaining get to go first in the next meeting, assuming they still want some time.
7. At the end of the meeting, the group might engage in some social loafing to help the group wind down.

People are willingly give feedback to each other. No one has to deal with the situation of posing an issue or self-disclosing, and then the group responds with silence.

If the discussion leads to something that the person working an issue feels uncomfortable discussing, it's perfectly OK for that person to say "I'd like to stop now."

Everyone is thinking about what they want to learn about themselves in group. They talk about that with the group. Group members help each other learn about themselves.

Whenever needed, the facilitators step in to help with these any of these goals.

Putting it in Writing: Process Notes

Process notes provide an important platform for the LE. At the end of each week, students write about their observations of the process and task group meetings, the afternoon classes, and themselves. I also write my notes about the process group and afternoon classes. All notes are posted online where everyone in the group can read them. In the next process group meeting, students are encouraged to BITG anything that they wrote about or read. In some process groups students also give "feedback slips" to each other and me: slips of paper (prepared ahead of time) where they write feedback to what someone had written in their notes. We then take turns discussing the feedback slips.

Everyone understands that process notes serve the purpose of examining the underlying socio-emotional processes of the group; they are not simply descriptions of what people said or did. The notes are a place to explore your own subjective reactions to the group. Applying concepts for the introductory lectures and the class textbook is required.

For the process group meeting, students address these questions:

- What sequence of events occurred? What does this reveal?
- How did people communicate? What did they communicate?
- How much did each person participate?
- Who were the leaders? What alliances were present?
- How does this session compare to previous ones?
- Was the group productive? Stuck? Why?
- What direction is the group taking?
- How did you feel about these things?
- What did you learn about yourself?

For the task group, students write about these issues:

- Leadership patterns
- Alliances and subgroups
- Communication patterns
- How problems are solved, or not
- How decisions are made, or not
- How the task group has changed over time
- Your role in the group
- Your thoughts and feelings about these things.

For the afternoon classes, they might consider such questions as:

- How did the class and the two groups react to the class activity that day?
- What role did the instructor play? How did the instructor interact with students?
- How did the two groups interact with each other?
- How did students benefit (or not) from the class activity?
- What were your thoughts and feelings about these things

For a more detailed and immediate analysis of a process group meeting, group members are encouraged, at the end of the session, to record their observations using this analysis sheet. Their observations are then discussed in the next process group meeting.

Process Group Analysis Sheet

Date:

The overall mood of the group. When that mood changed

The major topics or issues discussed

Important issues that popped up briefly

The major patterns of communication (who talked the most and to whom)

The people with a high influence on the group

Issues that came up about group or about people in the group

Feelings expressed by or observed in group members

People trying to prevent the expression of feelings, especially negative ones

When did the LE occur. The people who encourage and participated in it

When and why did silences occur?

What possible frictions, rivalries, or conflicts appeared in the group?

What people assumed a socio-emotional role in the group. How did they do that?
(showed support, helped others talk, mediated when there was friction, relieved tension).

Who seemed uninvolved in the group, bored, distant?

Was there any evidence of subgrouping (in how people sat or talked)?

Is anything being avoided in the group?

Are group members overly polite and nice to each other? Who encourages this?

What norms were evident in the group about how people should behave?

Are there any "shoulds" that came up in the group
(people implying "you SHOULD be this way or that way?")

Although these writing exercises are designed to encourage self-reflection and especially LE discussions in process group, the process notes and feedback slips sometimes evolve into a subterranean emotional expression and communication among students. Things are written and read about, but not openly discussed in group. We talk about not letting process notes siphon off interpersonal energy from the group, but rather use them as a springboard for LE discussions.



Coming Back for More: The Student Facilitators

As a for-credit independent study project, some students return after completing the Group Dynamics course to serve as a facilitator for the new round of enrolled students. Most facilitators are students interested in a career in counseling and psychotherapy. This experience, I tell them, will prepare them well for graduate school. The guidelines I give the facilitators are rather simple:

- stimulate self-disclosure, feedback, and group processing (the LE)
- encourage the self-reflective loop
- encourage people to talk to each other and the group as a whole
- be like a “conductor” of an orchestra
- be like a guide helping people to explore a territory
- be like a referee to make sure people follow the rules and play fairly
- be a mediator in conflict (you don’t take sides)
- help the group to stay focused on an issue to work it through
- provide feedback to people and about the group as a whole
- serve as a model of behaviors that help the group
- don't lead the task group, simply help them see what they're doing

Although in some years we had only one facilitator for each of the two groups, the more optimal strategy is to have two. Being the only facilitator results in a situation where your peers, your fellow students, overtly or covertly pressure you to be just another group member like them. Social loaf with us. Don't make any observations about underlying socio-emotional issues. This pressure is particularly strong in task group because Dr. Suler is not present (I'm with the other group in a process group meeting). It's a challenge to resist that peer pressure. In a few cases, the group encouraged the facilitator "not to tell Dr. Suler" about something that happened in a task group meeting, even though everyone knows that one of the responsibilities of the facilitator is to discuss task group with Dr. Suler and the other facilitators in their weekly meetings.

Having two facilitators for each of the two groups bypasses these temptations. The facilitators support each other, assist each other, and in our weekly meetings share with me and the other facilitators what they are learning about the groups and themselves, including what it's like to be a facilitator. Although at times the facilitators of a group might compete with each other, more often they form a strong bond.

The facilitators find it both fascinating and informative to hear about what's happening in the other group. Even more enlightening is the morning that they sit in on the other group's task meeting.

The process group was a challenge for almost all of the facilitators. I told them that their job was much harder than mine. I was the instructor, in a totally different category than them in the minds of the group members. I could get away with posing questions or making observations about the group. Being among peers, they did not have that luxury. Stepping into the role of a LE facilitator might alienate them from the other group members. Jokes about being a Mini-Dr. Suler are not uncommon.



And let's not forget...

A few other issues deserve mentioning. They are especially relevant to the process group. We discuss them often during the course of the semester.

Group Boundaries

The process as well as the task group function best when we make an effort to maintain the group boundaries, the infrastructure that holds the group together, helps it work smoothly, and gives it stability over time. The group is closed, no new members are added once it begins. Attendance is stable. The group meets consistently at the same time and place. Group discussions are confidential.

Everyone, but especially the facilitators, try to keep these boundaries firm, otherwise the process of the group can shift, sometimes dramatically. If the group meets in a location other than the assigned room, social loafing may dominate the session. If two or more people are absent, the group can feel depleted, while the absence of a particular person can open up discussions that were previously suppressed. Our rule of thumb: if we talk about an absentee, we must let that person know in the process notes and in the next meeting what we said. If confidentiality is broken, conflicts inevitably surface.

Task vs Socio-emotional leaders

One of the challenges of the task group is for the members to figure out how to get the tasks done. Most decide a leader is needed. Some groups try to alternate leaders, but most rely on the people who willingly step into the role, or feel they have to lest nothing gets done. If a leadership vacuum appears, some facilitators feel pressure to step into the role of task leader, even though I tell them they don't have to; their job is simply to help the group understand what's happening. Task leaders quickly realize they must deal with criticism as well as praise, along with feeling responsible for the group succeeding or failing in its tasks.

Students are pleased to learn that there's another type of leader who can greatly influence the group, although they seem invisible as a "leader" compared to the task leader of task group. These "socio-emotional leaders" attend to the feelings and relationships that surface in the group. They help people participate and feel good. They mediate in conflicts. This is the job of the student facilitator, but often other students assume this role. One's natural personality style determines the motivation and skill of a person taking on the role of a task or socio-emotional leader.

Subgroups

Within each group of the two separate groups of students (and sometimes across the two groups), subgroups form as a powerful influence on the group as a whole. Some of these subgroups coalesce around relationships that existed prior to the course, but often these collections of two, three, or four students form as component of the group's development, sometimes even overriding prior relationships. A subgroup can gain obvious power over the whole group, or it may operate more subtly in the background as a private support and influence system.

The subgroups often carry over to activities outside the official class time. Socializing outside the boundaries of the official class periods tends to reinforce: bonding with the subgroup rather than the whole group; allegiance to the subgroup; talking about group members outside of process group meetings; secretly supporting each other in meetings; and protecting the subgroup rather than let the group understand it.

For example, when group members regularly go for lunch together between the morning lab period and the afternoon class, they tend to develop their own subculture of shared experiences, attitudes, and inside jokes. Even when the lunch group has the best of intentions, those who don't attend lunch feel that they are not in with the in-crowd.

When subgroups go out on the town, they place themselves in the awkward position of deciding whether BITG applies to what happened during their outing and their reactions to it, good or bad. They feel some things should not be discussed, resulting in secrets, awkwardness, stronger feelings about the subgroup, and other group members now really thinking that they are not in with the in-crowd.

Encouraging everyone to discuss the subgroups and their impact on the whole group can bypass these problems. I tell the students that subgroups are good when they bring energy to the group. They are not helpful when they draw energy out of the group.

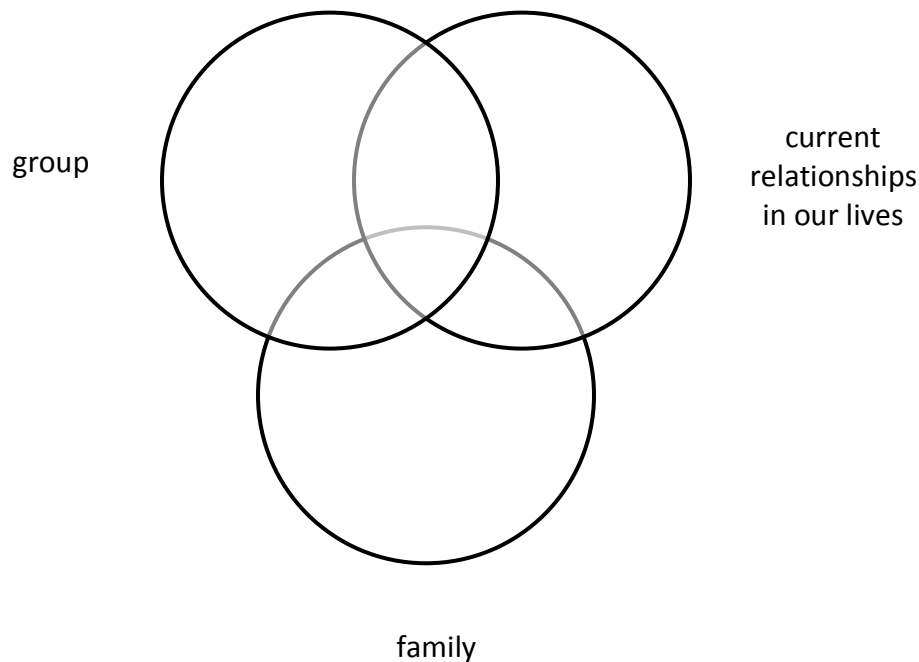


Social Microcosms

Theory states that interpersonal learning groups can become a social microcosm of one's life outside of group. We tend to recreate our outside relationships, especially from our family of origin, within the group. Often this is an unconscious reenactment. Students are not required to explore this idea for themselves, but many cannot help but realize how it applies to them. Some play a father role, some a mother role. Some see each other as siblings. The same sorts of feelings they have in their family and life in general inevitably pop up in group. I encourage students to understand these three intersecting spheres of relationships in their lives:

- *the here and now* of our relationships in group
- *the there and then* of our relationships in our family of origin
- *the there and now* of our relationships with peers, friends, and love interests in our current lives "out there" in the world

Insights into the intersections of the spheres can be profound. Do you play a similar role right now in group as you do out there in the world, at work, with friends, with lovers, or back then in your family or origin?



Are we a Cult?

Two afternoon class discussions are devoted to the various socio-emotional influence techniques that cults use to bond, motivate, and control their members. It's a dismaying eye-opener for students to realize that many of these techniques are employed by groups that we wouldn't necessarily classify as cults. The military, fraternities, and sororities quickly come to their mind. Students then become intrigued by the possibility that we are like a cult, with Dr. Suler being its leader. It becomes an ongoing joke in the class, as evident in this cartoon created by one student, a reference to the movie "Moonchild" about the Unification Church (I added the BITG poster to the image):



I admit that we too use some of the same influence techniques, but also describe the important differences between "bad cults" as compared to groups like us, Greek life, or the military. For example, the leaders of harmful cults deceive their members and use them for their own hidden purposes. Those other groups do not. In the case of our Group Dynamics course, our mission is to understand the underlying socio-emotional processes in the group, the different ways the course is affecting them, how people feel about Dr. Suler, and conflicts that might be surfacing. We encourage you to think for yourself.

The leaders of a detrimental cult would never allow such independent thinking, peek under the socio-emotional hood, the expression of actual feelings towards the leader, or the surfacing of conflicts that might disrupt the leaders' objectives. Such discussions are squashed or punished.

Evolution is hard



By the end of the first two weeks of meetings, the groups have mostly passed through the "norming" stage of getting used to how the process group works. There is less anxiety, awkwardness, silences, social loafing, avoidance of the LE, and dependence on the facilitator to tell them what to do,

The group then enters the "conforming" stage, the stage of harmony and affection marked a sense of group identity, enhanced cohesion, and personal investment in the group. Self-disclosure and feedback occurs more often than in the norming stage, usually revolving around seeking and getting advice about problems in one's personal life. However, there also is a push towards conformity, an intolerance of deviance in the group, and considerable side-stepping around frictions between the members. They try to avoid feedback and disclosure about how people might have some negative thoughts about each other. It's an "I love you and you love me, so don't rock the boat" atmosphere.

Once the group realizes and passes through this focus on harmony and conformity, they enter the dreaded "storming" stage. Suppressed conflicts surface, often about power, dominance, leadership, and contribution to the group. Or some people just don't like each other. Group cohesion starts to crack. Subgroups take sides. There are awkward silences and "shoulds" thrown at each other. A particular person might find themselves on the hot seat of a peer court. They turn into a scapegoat on whom the group focuses as a way to avoid other problems in the group. In posed photos created by the groups, they often choose to depict this conflict stage:



In the introductory lectures I predict the groups will experience this conflict stage, that working through it leads to the fully functioning process group. But the students don't believe conflict will happen to them. They feel caught off guard when it does springs up.

I also predict that there very well could be a conflict BETWEEN the two groups. In fact, over the years I feel dismayed at realizing how powerful a need it is for us humans to avoid conflict and establish unity (albeit shallow) within our own group by setting ourselves against the perceived OTHER who is different and against us. For the students in Group Dynamics, I offer this handout to help them understand the various facets of this intergroup conflict.

INTERGROUP CONFLICT

There's probably no one factor accounting for a conflict between the groups, but rather several. Below are some factors. These don't apply to everyone, but my guess is that each of them does apply to at least some people.

Dwelling on the conflict "between the groups" is a way to avoid talking about what specific people from each group feel negative about each other. One angry group member or subgroup can turn the whole group against the other group.

Dwelling on the conflict between the groups may be a way to avoid talking about conflicts that are going on within each group.

The conflict between the groups may serve as a way to channel (displace) and vent hostilities that are really about relationships within each group. It's a way to protect the harmony/affection stage and avoid conflict within the group.

Being angry with the "other" group builds cohesion within each group (the "in-group/out-group" phenomenon). But does it work well?

Sibling rivalry (the social microcosm in action). Each group wants to be the "better" or "special" group in the eyes of Dr. Suler.

Some people are used to conflicts, maybe even like the conflict between the groups, or think it is fun and entertaining, so they keep fueling it. Some people may need to disrupt the groups or the class by fueling the conflict.

Some people may think the conflict makes me (Dr. Suler) feel confused and helpless about what to do about it. Maybe there's a need to make me feel that way, because some students sometimes feel that way about the course.

We also talk about the different styles people use to deal with intra or inter group conflict: the "owl" who tries to figure out and solve the conflict; the "teddy bear" who smooths it over; the "shark" who is out to win at all costs; the "fox" who attempts a clever compromise; and the "turtle" who withdraws.

In the last stage of group development, the "performing" stage of a mature and fully functioning process group, people know how to work the LE. They want to bring issues to group in order to learn about themselves and each other. Little time is wasted on social loafing. Group cohesion and commitment is high. Differences among members are not just accepted, but embraced. Although conflicts still come up, the group knows how to work through them. They come to realize that they can learn a great deal about themselves by recognizing, discussing, and resolving conflicts.

In the introductory lecture I tell the class that one semester is not quite long enough for the groups to work through all the stages of development, to make it fully into the performing stage. Some cling to the very enjoyable phase of harmony and affection. Some get stuck looping on the same issues in the conflict stage. But many groups do have sessions in which they experience what a fully functioning process group is like. They feel proud about having come that far, and they should.



The Task Group

Many groups enjoy their weekly task group meeting, maybe even more so than the unpredictably uncomfortable process group meeting. Even though the student facilitator is present in task group, the professor is not. When the cats away...

Students see this opportunity to social loaf, joke around, let off steam, and have fun with people they are getting to know rather well. No one wants to take the lead or the heat for insisting that assignments get done. Frictions develop between those wanting to social loaf and those pushing for task performance. With the help of the facilitator as well as process

group discussions about problems in the task group, the students always manage to complete the assignments. Afterwards, they submit a group report in which they describe not just what they did, but more importantly how they did it and the roles people played in that process.



For some of the activities, the group decides on their own which exercises to undertake as described in the course textbook, *Joining Together* by Johnson and Johnson. Their choices often reflect important socio-emotional issues in their group. Other activities I assign to them, such as creating:

- *A name for the group*

A cherished facet of their identity

- *A title and five highlights for each week the group meets*

An excellent thumbnail summary of the group over time

- *An imaginary group house*

A written description of a place where they could all gather. The imaginary dwelling reveals obvious and hidden aspects of the group and its members.

- *A physical influence line*

When members of the group line up according to their degree of “influence,” the results are obvious or surprising, and revealing. Not everyone sees influence the same way.

– *An imaginary cult*

When the group writes a description of an imaginary cult, its purpose and philosophy, how it recruits people, its daily activities, and how it handles deviant members, the group reveals a great deal about its own issues.

– *An imaginary group member*

The imaginary member of their group that they describe in a report becomes a container, often exaggerated, for the issues with which the group struggles.

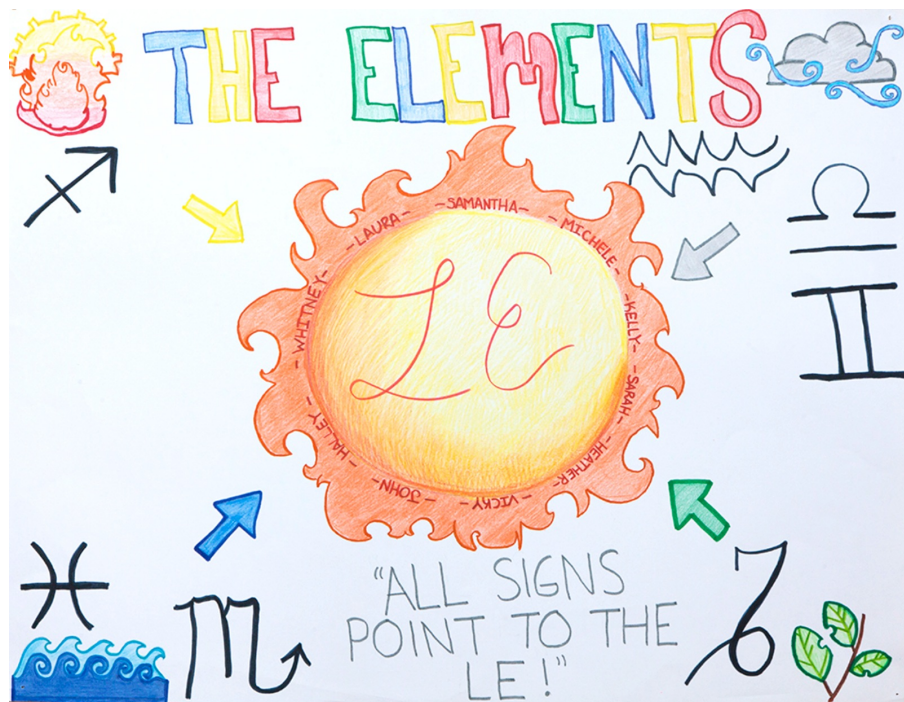
– *Personal Mottos*

Each member of the group comes up with their personal "motto" that captures something important about their role or feelings about being in the group.

– *The group poster and photos*

Using whatever art supplies they wish, the group creates a poster that represents who they are. We hang them on the wall so we can see them throughout the semester. The only requirement is for the poster to include the names of the group and its members. In photos taken by me, the group creates poses that specifically represent important themes in their group. They also create a traditional "class photo" pose.

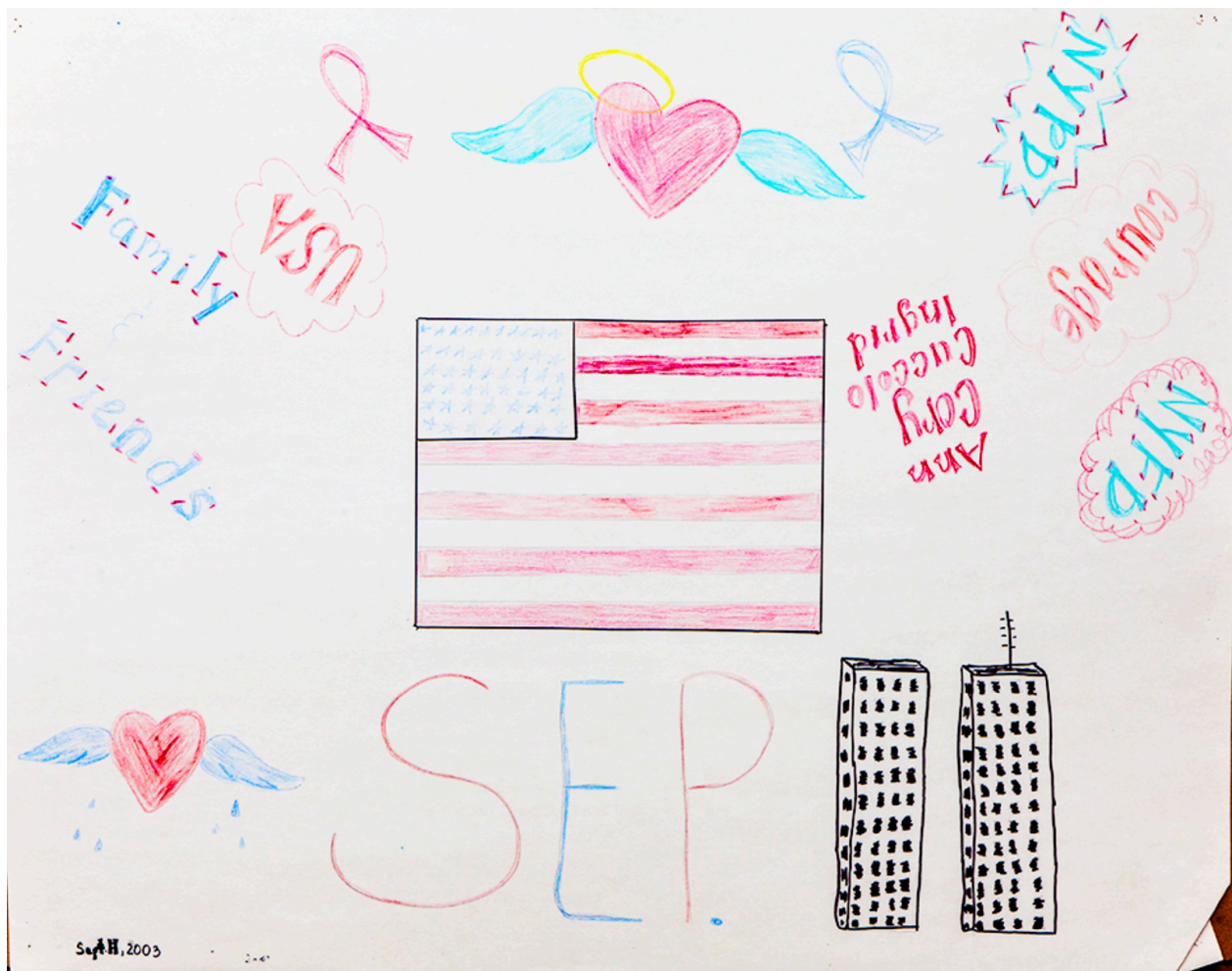
The group poster and photos often reveal the personalities of individual people, relationships and subgroups, and the character of the group as a whole. Having the two groups share and discuss their posters and photos in the afternoon class leads to many useful insights, and sometimes to conflicts between the groups. We may not like "outsiders" offering observations about our people, especially when they point out things we didn't fully realize or don't like.











On September 11, ten minutes before the morning task and process groups began, a second plane crashed into the Twin Towers. We decided to go ahead with the meetings. In process group, we sat there stunned and confused, not sure what to make of it. In task group, they created this poster.

An Example of a Group's Week Titles and Highlights

Week 1: First Impressions

- Feelings of awkwardness
- Miscommunication
- Engaging in effective listening
- Creative consensus
- "Posters are fun"

Week 2: Calm Before the Storm

- Accomplished a second task together by working hard and intrinsically cared about coming to decisions together.
- There was definite feedback and disclosure—we got into the LE!
- We picked a leader and established some ground rules for future leadership roles.
- Time management was better organized in this task group than the last time.
- Conforming: we conformed to each other's needs after learning a little about each other.

Week 3: From Misunderstanding to Conflict Resolution

- "Compulsive explainer"
- Out in the open
- Underneath the surface
- Capturing group in pictures
- Identifying

Week 4: Big Things Poppin and EVOs Stompin

- "Are we this happy?"
- There are no longer "quiet members."
- Opening up to one another
- What is attraction?
- Group waited to include Meg

Week 5: EVOs are Evolving

- missing group members influence the group
- harmony and affection stage
- task group was extremely productive
- CC exam
- effective leadership

Week 6: Thinking Outside the Box

- Lost a group member/adjourning
- Losing our senses
- Marla's stinky roommate
- Closure
- Group pride

Week 7: Lights, Camera, Action!

- Box of Joe equals happiness
- Feedback and disclosure doesn't have to be equal
- What is feedback and disclosure?
- Re-occurrence of Meg
- "I need to powder my nose!"

Week 8: Change gon come

- flip the script
- me casa sucasa (electric fence)
- missing link
- balancing out (self-disclosure)
- intimacy

Week 9: Growing up is hard to do

- Melissa's birthday
- SuperSuler
- Other group observation
- Nortap Eefoc Anoroc
- Two tasks

Week 10: Lights ? Action

- Plain or Sicillian?
- Social loafing takes over our task
- Melissa's Blues turn that frown upside down
- Sam from OIT sucks (you call Dr. Suler)
- Mary's computer comes through

An Example of the "Mottos" of Group Members

In trying to, inconspicuously (sp?) of course, I found balance within my group and myself.... Back off, Dr. Suler!

**Rock the clock and
be a fox!**

I can be a participant-observer without participating too much.

"There's more than meets the eye in group dynamics and the people in it."

difuser

I'm blue da ba dee da ba die
(I know this has nothing to do with the exercise but the colored paper reminded me of a song that's been stuck in my head and I couldn't think of anything else)

**AN OPEN MIND AND
SELF-REFLECTION
CAN LEAD TO GREAT
CHANGE.**

**We're all so
different but
we're also
the same.**

You get out of this course what you put in – you have to give away a little of yourself to learn more.

**People
don't do
things to
you, they
just do
things.**

Being quiet and reserved is only one aspect of my personality, but those who got to know me will see that there is a lot beneath my initial reserve ☺

**Group dynamics:
"Just do it," or
you'll hear about
why you didn't.**

**I may be president one
day, but I need to work on
my "oh man" face first.**

?

The role you play is where you belong, don't try to change it.

**Coming
full
circle**

**I can be in control
without being
perceived as
controlling.**

*Heavenly father
doesn't know
everything.*

**"Making people
laugh when
times get
rough."**

*"Let yourself be
vulnerable, you
will learn the
most about
yourself that way.*

I can be open and honest not only about the big things but the little things and that leads to self disclosing.

An Example of a Group's Analysis of their Imaginary House

Based on what we wanted for the general house, it seemed that we still value our own individuality and space because we wanted everything big and separated. Since this is our first time together after a week apart, it is possible that we need time to reconnect. It was interesting that a lot of people mentioned ways to “escape” the house. Some people might have things that they are trying to escape. Sam mentioned a finished basement and that could symbolize an under the surface finished foundation to move on to something else.

The house could be symbolic of our home or our group depending on the group member. Laura, Barb, and Sara were very specific in what they wanted in their individual rooms and bathrooms. The three of them seem to know what they want. Barb plans her future, which indicates why her room was detailed. Valerie was the only one to explain the reasoning of why she needed things the way she described it. She said that she needs everything to be rationale. Sally talked a lot about wanting to explore and mentioned tunnels, and it seemed that this connected back to the five truths and a lie activity. Sam and Layla have always seemed to be the highest influencers in the group and they both wanted the least for their individual spaces.

Even though we were going around saying what we wanted individually, Sam still focused on what he thought the group needed. A stranger would think that the people who owned the house were high maintenance and materialistic until you went into the individual bedrooms.

The house is like the group in general and our individual rooms are our true personality. We still do not want to offend people, so we still try to keep things in. This group feels very similar to our first task group because of the week apart.

An Example of a Group's Analysis of their Imaginary Group Member

History: Jordan is from South Dakota and is the only child in his family. His parents are married and he has a good relationship with them. He has a job on campus and is going to school for psychology. He wants to become a forensic psychologist and has a minor in criminal justice. He is an athlete and plays baseball for Rider. He is a good student and has a lot of acquaintances on campus. He was originally recruited to play baseball at Rider.

Personality: Jordan has a really neat accent and is very friendly and social. He is a people person and enjoys company. He likes to make people laugh although sometimes he doesn't know when to be serious; he tends to talk too much. He is mostly concerned with other people's needs and tries to please everyone.

Behavior in Group: In the beginning he social-loafed a lot because he wanted the attention and likes to talk. He doesn't really take the task too seriously because he is so focused on trying to make everyone laugh. In a sense, he is trying to mask his insecurities since it is important to him that everyone "likes" him. He is not used to dealing with conflict as a result of his family... they prefer not to "rock the boat" and keep the peace. They are not used to expressing their true emotions freely as it is seen as a sign of weakness and therefore chooses to use humor as a means of concealing that. He learns that conflict is OK and should be dealt with if it arises.

Also, he becomes more comfortable with expressing how he really feels with the group (something he could never do before). He tells everyone else that he has a serious girlfriend back at home but informs us that he actually doesn't... he only says that because he wants to focus on school and uses that as something to hide behind. We came to the conclusion that maybe he secretly does want a girlfriend because he feels lonely although the group makes him feel like he is a part of something bigger and gives him a sense of belonging, therefore, he is honest with us about not having one.

He tends to keep himself at an emotional distance, which is seen through the fact that he has many acquaintances as opposed to a few close friends. He learns that he really is feeling lonely and doesn't want a girlfriend on campus because he will eventually just have to go back home again and doesn't want to hurt anyone in the process, most importantly himself. He feels isolated from others the majority of the time and we then realize that our assumptions were incorrect and it's not a girlfriend he wants, it's a best friend... someone he can trust and depend on. At the end of the semester his sexuality was still open for interpretation because of the mixed feelings he expressed in group.

The Afternoon Classes

In the afternoon classes we engaged in various discussions and activities designed to help the students in the two separate groups (who earlier that morning had either their task or process group meeting) get to know each other better and share their experiences.

Some of those activities involved the two groups discussing the process and outcome of a task group project, such as their group poster, group photos, and imaginary group house. Hearing how the other group perceived your group's creations felt insightful, surprising, and sometimes critical. Intergroup conflicts could play out through these discussions. The groups see that they are similar, often in ways as defined by textbook concepts, but they are also very different. Each group has its own unique personality... As always, BITG.

Other activities in the afternoon class are described more fully in my book *Teaching Psychology: Concepts and Techniques for Experiential Learning* (available in my Collected Works at johnsuler.com). These exercises take on a whole new level of meaning and power in the group dynamics course as compared to the other courses in which we do these activities:

- Students try to detect the one lie in your list of five facts about yourself
- Understanding body language in role plays and by mirroring a partner's body language
- A whole class story created one word at a time, person by person
- An official group brainstorming session to address some issue in class
- Using the I Ching for insight into oneself
- Drawing a sociogram of your family and group (to see how they compare)
- Take the group's pulse by each student saying word one about how they feel right now
- Imagining Halloween costumes for other students and the professor
- An end of the semester party and "awards ceremony" where students write down on slips of paper any kind of award they want to give other students. The instructor collects and announces the awards (a fun, insightful way to end the semester)

We also watched and discussed videos of groups from past years, as well as three movies:

The Big Chill: Even a fairly small group is filled with many complex interpersonal dynamics. A group of friends can suddenly find themselves launched into the LE.

12 Angry Men: Consensus decision-making is difficult. Individual personalities and relationships between people have a big impact on the whole group's task performance. Sometimes a work group finds itself launched into the LE.

Moon Child: A cult uses very specific social/psychological techniques to draw people in, maintain their commitment, and prevent them from leaving. You can see these processes in many types of organizations. This low budget, relatively unknown film about the Unification Church might seem dated, but it is surprisingly accurate.



The Documents Folder

During the course there are process notes, task group reports, writings, photos, drawings, etc. produced by the groups and in afternoon class activities. I encourage students to save them in their "documents folder." All of these things are bits of information that reveal important features of the group dynamics. One skill I ask them to develop – and to demonstrate in their process notes and final paper – is the ability to analyze and compare these documents as evidence of important issues in the group. How do different pieces of evidence in the documents support a particular conclusion about people, relationships, or the groups? How do different pieces of evidence fit together to paint a bigger or more complete picture of what is happening? I remind them to keep their documents folder in a safe place to protect the confidentiality of its contents.

Perceptions of the Instructor

The students' reactions to me in Group Dynamics are complex. I'm the professor they know from our afternoon classes and other courses they've taken with me: casual, friendly, humorous, willing to act out scenes, sometimes silly, always introducing exercises designed for understanding yourself and others. In process group I'm also the rather quiet, observing facilitator with revealing insights into the group, who invites them to self-disclose and offer feedback. In their analysis of Halloween costumes students imagined for me over the years, they captured the varied perceptions students have of me:

Personality Traits Amplified

- Jesus - peacemaker
- Freud – analytical
- Ringmaster- leads
- Dr. House – thinks differently than other professors (psychoanalytical)
- Scarecrow – awkward
- Giraffe- tall
- Rubik's cube – hard to figure out
- Scuba diver – looking below the surface
- Tennis player – bounces back and forth between groups
- Albert Einstein – always has new ideas
- Mad scientist – comes up with different ideas (from the rest of the department)
- Clown – very funny
- Condom – he's protective

Personality Traits Reversed

- Waldo – he sticks out (from the other professors)
- Oompa Loompa – they're short and he's tall
- College student party animal- he's a professor and probably not a party animal
- Male exotic dancer – he's shy
- Marionette – he's not being controlling, does his own thing
- Borat – Borat has no idea what's going on and Suler knows all
- Tin Man – the tin man didn't have a heart and Dr.S is very caring and emotional
- Judge – he doesn't judge us
- Homeless bum- the bum doesn't have power

Wishes, Needs, Anxieties Projected

- Superman (and other heroes)- he's our hero
- Wizard – able to do it all
- Priest/ rabbi – he's a mediator
- Lumberjack—he's hacking into our issues
- Ninja – because he deals with our issues in a cunning way
- Scuba diver – looks beneath the surface
- Eminem – we want him to let loose and rap the LE poem
- Mime – he gets us to read others' body language
- Snugglybear – you want to talk to him, get close to him, self-disclose
- Doctor/surgeon- we want him to fix us
- Rabbit from Alice in Wonderland – he shows us the way
- Gravedigger – Gives us grades! Digs up our past. Makes you think deeper
- Judge – we're worried he might judge us

Students often joke about how I might have some kind of secret power over them, like a cult leader, possibly brainwashing them – topics we openly discussed. I often joined them in their humor, as in my "self-portrait" reply to a "news brief" written by a student.

RIDER SECURITY BRIEFS

SULERITES INVADE RIDER UNIVERSITY



One of the most shocking events ever to hit the rider campus happened this weekend! A band of mind eating zombies known only by their alias, "SULERITES", invaded the rider campus and took over the Moore Library. The librarians, members of the save a book foundation, tried their best to fend off these creatures but to no avail. The "SULERITES" proved to be more than the librarians could handle, and their brains were eaten along with many of the books. These "SULERITES" have made it known that they are planning on launching an attack on the rest of the Rider Campus and are hoping to become the sole rulers of rider. They also stated that their next point of attack is the Science Building where their leader is being held captive by a coalition made up of the Breakfast Club and Coffee Dreams. From what we hear this dynamic duo was able to trap the "SULERITES" leader during the invasion and are now picking his brain to see if there is anything that will help them defeat this terrible menace. The "Sulerites" are increasing in number at a rapid pace as they have converted all those who have come in contact with them into mindless zombies like themselves. If there is anyone who knows a way to stop these creatures and this cult craze, we urge you to come save our school!!! We will keep you updated as this story develops.

-The Rider Informant



Sensing the impending danger of the mutated Sulerites, Professor Suler invents the BITG Gun in order to combat the Zombies.

One year the students in a task group meeting decided to create a poster of me. In the afternoon class, we discussed the symbolism of the sunshine, flower, birds, being on the road, slow speed limit vs race car pants, a green thumb, and "Madman" written on my belt (also the title of my novel that some students read in another class).



In all my courses, including the afternoon Group Dynamics classes, I humorously don my "binoculars" to look over the classroom, trying to determine where the class "is at." They may be withdrawn, perhaps staring into their phones, or so talkative amongst themselves that they barely notice me – but my binoculars trick always gets their attention. Turning the tables on me was a popular theme in the group photo poses invented by the Group Dynamics students:



The Kidnapping

One morning, when I arrived at the room for the process group, no one was there. Just a message on the blackboard, written in large letters, "Dr. Suler - meet us downstairs." I have to admit that I was a bit apprehensive about this, but I also had to laugh. Last year when this happened, that group insisted on me meeting them out at the gazebo on the lake. That meeting turned out fine, so I assumed this one would too.

When I got downstairs, the group was waiting for me in the lobby. They all had coats on and were looking rather anxious and fidgety. There was a video camera aimed at me, recording my reactions. "Hi," I said, pausing in the middle of the stairs. "What's up?"

"Come down," they said. I had no idea what they had in store for me, but I figured it would be good to go with the flow. When I reached the bottom, Ann told me to turn around. I felt something slip over my head and quickly realized it was a blindfold. Curiously, it was Ann - the caring person, as described by herself and others - whom the group encouraged to begin the kidnapping.

"If we're going outside," I asked, "can I get my coat?" Quickly recovering from this perhaps unexpected glitch in their plans, they threw Bob's coat over my shoulders, someone took me by the hand (I quickly realized it was Bob), and they led me out the door and into the cold fall air. As I was guided over grass and pavement, I briefly wondered if any of my colleagues were nearby, watching, wondering what the hell was going on. Maybe, I thought to myself, it's a good thing that I'm blind-folded with a coat draped over me. Maybe they won't know that it's Suler.

Relying on my spatial memory, I assumed we were headed to the parking lot. Sure enough, they stuffed me into a car and proceeded to drive me off campus. It took me a minute or two to realize that Allan and Ann were in the front seat, and Bob next to me in the back. Was it coincidence that just a few days earlier, in my meeting with the co-facilitators, we talked about how Allan and Bob seemed to be forming a "revolutionary coalition?"

"Am I being recorded?" I asked Ann, whose voice I heard coming from the passenger seat in front of me.

"Yep, for our group project."

A very strange feeling – blindfolded, being driven who knows where, my reactions being taped for posterity. I felt a bit uncomfortable, awkward, but also very curious about how this would play out. As I thought about what I might say – hopefully something that would shed a little light on this group dynamic – Allan and Ann debated about directions. I could hear Bob thumbing through a magazine next to me.

"So who's idea was this?" I asked.

"The whole group."

"Am I allowed to know where we're going?"

"No."

The idea of hazing entered my mind. "Is this going to be a humiliation experience?"

"No, nothing like that. And don't worry. We'll be back in time for your office hours."

Well, at least now I knew they weren't going to toss me over a cliff somewhere.

We made a complex series of lefts and rights that left me totally clueless as to where we were. Finally, the car came to a stop and they escorted me out of the backseat. I could hear heavy traffic. We were near a major road.

"We're taking you inside this building," they said. "Watch out for the step."

Nevertheless, I tripped as I walked through the doorway. "Thanks a lot, Bob!" I complained, and they laughed.

I sensed that we were in a large, rather quiet space. "Do you recognize the smell?" Bob asked me.

I did – a very familiar smell from my childhood. "Are we in a bowling alley?" They all laughed and took off my blindfold. Sure enough, that's where we were – in fact, we were the only ones there, hence the anomaly of there being no sound of balls rolling and pins colliding.

"We're all gonna go BOWLING!" they exclaimed. "Group dynamics in the real world!"

During the car ride, or during our bowling, I could have encouraged the group to think about all the fascinating group dynamic issues encapsulated in this kidnapping. I could have encouraged them to talk about their need to rebel, to take me out of the authority figure role, to make me one of them and see me as a "real" person. Or about their need to escape, at least for one session, the anxiety of being in process group. I could have encouraged them to think about how they were testing whether or not I trusted them, just as the issue of trusting each other and me is so important in group – or testing whether or not I would allow them to be "naughty" and still accept them. I even could have tried to steer their insight into deeper unconscious feelings in the group, feelings they were trying to instill in me by conjuring up this kidnapping scheme – feeling disoriented, dependent, a little helpless, that they were headed somewhere but not entirely sure where.

I could have done these things, but I didn't. We could do that in our next process group meeting. Right now, it seemed more important to just hang out with them, bowl, and enjoy each other's company, even if Dr. Suler was a better bowler thanks to the lessons his father taught him as a child.

Sometimes bowling is just bowling.

The kidnapping proved to be a turning point in the group's development. They now more fully trusted Suler, as well as the LE.



The Final Paper

In the final paper for the course, students write about their process and task group meetings, the afternoon class, the roles and personality styles of other students, subgroups, the outcome of their various activities and projects, the sociogram they drew of their group, and most importantly, their reaction to this experience and what they learned about themselves.

Many students report that it was one of the most challenging and lengthy papers they had ever written.

Group Dynamics is a highly experiential course aimed at enhancing interpersonal and intrapersonal insight. I also emphasize that we are doing research, that there are specific tools and concepts applied in understanding our group dynamics.

When writing their final papers, I encourage students to give serious thought to the handout about our research methods that I had given them at the beginning of the course...



Research Methods in Group Dynamics

The research methods used in this course differ from those used in other types of research. Statistical analysis does not play a role. Instead of using such “quantitative” analyses, the methods are more “qualitative.” Here are some of its key components:

1. Participant-Observation: Similar to quantitative research you are making objective observations of groups. But quite different than quantitative research you are also participating in the groups and therefore becoming a subject of your own research. You allow yourself to subjectively experience the group while also taking care to objectively understand your own personal reactions. A good participant-observer learns how to identify and understand even subtle subjective reactions. Your personal reactions are “data” to be examined and interpreted. Pay attention to your behavior in group, your feelings about it, memories about it that linger, and dreams you have about group. This maneuvering between objective and subjective understanding is a challenge. It requires the ability to “decenter” from your own personal reactions in order to investigate them objectively. It requires the development of an “observing self.” Understanding the group means understanding yourself.

2. Comparing Social Realities: Everyone in group has their own set of thoughts and feelings about group. Everyone sees the group from a different perspective. By talking to other people, by comparing your social realities, you can better understand the group dynamics, and yourself. This is what the LE is all about.

3. Objective Anchors: Comparing social realities can get complex and confusing. Sometimes it’s hard to tell whose social reality is “correct.” Seek out feedback from people who are not group members, including people who know you well and people who don’t. Because I, and sometimes the student facilitators, are not as deeply immersed into the group as you are, we can serve as these more objective sounding boards. Friends and family members too. However, always protect the confidentiality of your group members.

4. Converging Evidence: In the course there are all sorts of activities that generate *evidence* which reveals the group dynamics: process group meetings, task group meetings, the textbook activities, task group projects, afternoon class activities, behavior among group members that occurs outside of formal group meetings. Look for evidence from one activity or event that converges on and confirms evidence from other activities and events. The more evidence that confirms an idea you have about group, the more confident you can be about that idea. Comparing evidence from different activities can help you modify and deepen your ideas.

5. Idiosyncratic Events: Sometimes something very unusual will happen. Someone may say or do something out of the ordinary, or the group as a whole behaves very differently. Pay attention to these idiosyncratic events. They may be pointing to something important that you did not notice before.

6. Generating and Testing Hypotheses: As in any type of scholarly research, you are always creating, testing out, and modifying your hypotheses. You are looking for and comparing evidence to test your hypotheses – evidence in what you observe, in what others tell you, in how you personally think and feel.

Saying Goodbye

Thanks to the introductory lectures and my reminders during the last two weeks, we all know that we will go through "termination," otherwise known as the "adjourning stage." In the process group and especially in their "goodbye" process notes, I encourage students to discuss some of the important features of this stage:

Unfinished business

Significant issues and events in the group's history

The "big picture" of the group's development

What you did and did not get out of group

How it feels for the group coming to its end

How you say goodbye and how you feel about goodbyes

Early termination (withdrawing from the group before it actually ends)

What you learned about yourself

I encourage students to make one last effort to get something out of this experience that they had hoped for but never fully accomplished. What would you like to ask the group? What would you like to say to the group and the people in it?

Saying goodbye to the group is bittersweet for many students. They learned a lot about each other. They bonded during some very interesting experiences. They made friends. They might also feel a bit relieved as well as sad about the end of group, especially for seniors who are graduating at the end of the semester. They might have learned some important things about themselves, they might feel they could have done more in the LE. I try to sum it all up as concisely as I can in my good-bye process notes. What I say varies depending on the particular group of students, but it often goes something like this:

And now the end is near

If you remember, in our very first class I said that we were about to go on a journey together. I asked you to look around the classroom, at the group of students sitting around you. "That," I had said, "is the journey we will be taking. A journey into understanding this group that you're sitting in right now, and all the people in it."

Now that this journey is almost over, I think you realize what I meant.

Here are some things that I'd like you to keep in mind as we come to the end of that journey.

Understanding yourself and other people is not an easy thing to do. Sometimes it means coming face-to-face with things inside you that stir up all sorts of anxieties, emotions, and memories. That's what psychotherapy is all about.

Sometimes understanding yourself and others means encountering conflict. I said it before, and I'll say it again, and the textbook also talks about it: You learn about yourself through conflict. You CHOSE the people you fight with because, on an unconscious level, you know that you can learn from them. More often than not, when you are in a conflict with someone, that person is your own shadow. They are similar to you in many ways. They activate the sensitive part of your own psyche that you need to understand better.

To really learn from conflict, it's important to LISTEN to the other person, rather than justify yourself. It's important to really take a hard look at yourself rather than BLAME the other. It's important to try to truly understand the other person, and your reaction to that person, rather than simply "defend your position." Setting aside your own negative stuff in order to truly empathize with someone else is a very difficult thing to do, but it's what being a psychotherapist is all about.

I am often amazed and a bit sad when I hear people offering kindness, support, and understanding, and yet the person in a conflict can't hear it because they are too preoccupied with defending their position.

Really meaningful self-disclosures are not easy. It means taking a risk. It means allowing yourself to be vulnerable. It means TRUSTING. What has happened in your life that affected your ability to trust others, and how did that affect what you did in this class?

If you look at our last set of process notes, and compare them to the very first set, you will see how very far everyone has come. We all know a great deal more about each other, the group, and ourselves.

Did the group get to know who you really are? Did you show the group who you really are? If not, what stopped you? What part of you did you reveal, what part did you hide?

Given all that you have learned and everything that has happened in this class, what do you want to say to the group before our very last meeting? What do you want to say to a particular person? Now is your chance.

Very soon this group of these particular people will cease to exist. It will become a memory. That's a sad thing in some ways, but this is how life works. People come, people go. Experiences come, and they go. Make the best of it while you can. Learn as much as you can. Reach out to people as best you can. Because nothing lasts forever. Embrace that fact to make your life more fulfilling.

That's the last lesson of Group Dynamics.











Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful,
committed citizens can change the world:
indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

– Margaret Mead

