Theme-Centered Interactional Groups

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DEFINITION

The Theme-Centered Interactional (TCI) system of group leading has its roots in psychoanalytic group therapy, teaching, and communications theory. One to TCI's main theses is that individuals learn, grow, and heal best when they are totally involved; this means they are thinking, sensing, feeling, and intuiting within a milieu that aims at keeping these functions in balance. TCI calls this "living-learning." Based on humanistic premises, TCI is a cooperative rather than competitive approach to group interaction aimed at promoting personal growth and creativity as participants meet for the avowed purpose of sharing their ongoing thoughts and feelings about a previously agreed-upon theme. The theme, then, is considered central to the group's involvement. TCI emphasizes, however, a balance between focus on individual needs, the group-as-a-whole, and the theme (or task). Its chief advantage resides in its unique suitability for use by and for people without previous background in group psychotherapy and for its ability to blend the intellectual/ cognitive validity of a rap session with the emotional honesty of an encounter group while avoiding the pitfalls of both.

HISTORY

TCI was developed by Ruth Cohn in 1955, and is currently taught at the Workshop Institute for Living-Learning (W.I.L.L.), which maintains training facilities in New York City, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Michigan, Florida, Toronto, and Europe.

TECHNIQUE

Cohn describes the process of TCI as follows:

> *Group interaction is graphically described as a "triangle in the globe." The triangular points designate the functions of the individual (I), the group (We), and the them (It). The I comprises the awareness and activity of the individual in interaction with the group; the We designates the concern of each person for all others and the theme; the It is the purpose for which the group convenes. The globe is the time-space and other givens of the environment — be they school, organization, community, country, the network of purposes, or motivation inherent in the outside-of-the-group population. The inside group interaction is co-determined by the glove; thus the TCI group brings values and influences of the university, town, parents, and political-historical situations into the group interaction (Cohn, 1969–1970).*

The Leader's Role

The TCI leader is a participant-leader who functions both as chairman of his own self and of the group process. Similarly, TCI participants are encouraged to "chair" themselves, thus, gradually learning to observe the

group process and to participate in its leadership. To facilitate this process, TCI's ground rules and structure have to be made as explicit as possible; axioms, postulates, and auxiliary rules for communication are introduced early in the life of a group and are frequently reiterated.

TCI is a highly structured system of group leading based on the belief that a firm structure enhances energy flow within the group process rather than restricting it. Here the leader's primary function is that of achieving a dynamic balance between foci, which constantly shift back and forth between the "I," the "We," and the

"It" while at the same time maintaining an overall balance within the "Globe" (the environment in its myriad manifestations).

Axioms, Postulates, and Auxiliary Ground Rules (Cohn, 1975)

The TCI system is predicated upon the following humanistic axioms:

1. Human beings, as discrete psychobiological units within a unified cosmos, are seen to be simultaneously autonomous and interdependent.

2. Life, growth, and the decision-making processes involved in their unfolding deserve respect. Whatever promotes this respect is regarded as humane, whatever this does not as inhumane.

3. Free decision making is bound by both internal and external limits. These limits are expandable.

The foregoing axioms have in common the paradox of freedom within dependence from which are derived the following postulates:

1. Be your own chairperson. Basic to TCI is the standing invitation to "be your own chairperson" — i.e., not to wait for another's initiative before asserting yourself. However, personal chairmanship is not carte blanche to "do your own thing" without regard to others.

2. Disturbances take precedence. Unacknowledged personal distractions (whether internally or externally based) have a stifling effect on both individual and group process unless brought into the open. One cannot be fully present so long as one's preoccupation remains hidden. Where such disturbances are external to the group ("I fought with my boss today") a simple factual statement is often enough to enable one to "be with" the group and its theme. Disturbances arising within the group, however, must be brought out and attended to.

These two concepts embody the essence of TCI; they represent the recognition of existential phenomena and their translation into teachable and learnable postulates. We are indeed our own chairpersons — autonomous and interdependent, but neither omnipotent nor impotent. Disturbances do indeed take precedence; if unrecognized and not dealt with, they impede our

life processes.

As aids to the facilitation of these postulates TCI has developed several auxiliary ground rules of communication:

1. **Represent yourself.** Speak in the first-person singular — as opposed to using generalizing pronouns like "one," "we," "everybody," "you"; they only serve to evade personal accountability. On the other hand, speaking for oneself supports responsible statements, avoids projections, and prevents the disowning of one's creativity and fallibility.

2. **When posing a question, state your reason for asking it and what it means to you;** avoid the "interview." Authentic questions seek information necessary in order to understand something or to continue processes; they become clearer and more personal if the reasons for asking them are stated.

3. **Be authentic and selective in your communications.** Be aware of what you think and feel, and choose what you say and do. If you say or do something because you "must" or "ought" to, you are not acting autonomously, because your own evaluation of this action is missing.

4. **Give your personal reactions first and hold off interpretation of others for as long as possible.** At their best, accurate and well-timed interpretations can help to crystallize what the other person was already groping toward; they do not harm. Ill-timed interpretations, on the other hand, often involve hidden intentions and create resistances.

5. **Be sparing with generalizations.** They tend to interrupt the group process, although they can be useful in dynamic balancing or as a bridge to a new subtheme.

6. **When describing your perception of another person's characteristics or behavior, acknowledge it as such and state what they mean to you.** This, together with #2 above, helps to prevent scapegoating. Your opinions of another person, however accurate, are always subjective — with no claims to general validity. Stating what your opinions and/or questions mean to you promotes genuine dialogue.

7. **Side conversations have precedence.** Inasmuch as they are a form of disturbance, they are usually important and very often related to the theme. A participant talking to his neighbor may need help toward further and more open participation in the group process. It is important that this rule be conveyed not as an imperative but rather as an invitation ("Would you tell us what the two of you have been talking about?").

8. **Only one at a time, please.** Nobody can hear more than one statement at a time — verbal interactions have to be consecutive. By the same token, nonverbal communications, such as gestures, grimacing, and sub-grouping, can be equally disruptive and need to be picked up on and brought into the stream of things.

9. **If more than one person wants to speak at the same time, let each make a brief statement about what he has in mind.**

The Theme

In the words of Gordon and Liberman (1972), the purpose of having a theme is "to declare the group's focus in a clear, simple, inviting way. Like the title of a book or play, it has to attract its clientele, or at least not discourage them initially." They also explain what a theme is not: "A theme is not a topic ... is not an area of subject matter... is not an agenda ... is not a point of view ... is not a panacea proclamation such as Joy or Growth."

A theme may be specific in its focus (as, for example, "Creating New By-Laws for Our Organization" — a typical task-oriented group theme) or quite open-ended ("The Challenge of Change," or "Turning On to Learning"). In any case, sub-themes are sure to arise that must be dealt with and brought to closure in order to continue developing and relating to the central theme.

TCI group sessions usually last one and a half to two hours within ongoing (weekly) or intensive (single weekend or week-long) workshops. In a "one-shot" workshop, a time-span of two and a half to three hours is preferable.

APPLICATIONS

Applications of the TCI method are wide-ranging in their scope. Organizational meetings and other task-oriented groups come alive when this

particular style of leading is employed. Classrooms (ranging from kindergartens to doctoral seminars) have profited from its use, as have political rallies, parent-teacher-community meetings, managerial brainstorming and training programs, police-neighborhood collaborations, etc. It has been used for time-limited groups (Buchanan, 1969), orientation groups, and personal-growth groups in a variety of settings.

Finally, TCI has recently come into use in experiential psychotherapy — both group and diadic — thus coming full circle from its origins in the humanistic and experiential psychotherapies. This development springs from TCI's underlying humanistic philosophy, whereby helping people and clients work together in a reciprocal and collaborative relationship on whatever theme comes into focus. Last but not least, the core concept of chairmanship — awareness of one's responsibility, autonomy, and interdependence — embodies, after all, the prime goal of any psychotherapy.