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A Qualitative and Linguistic Analysis of an Authority Issues Training Group

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**A Qualitative and Linguistic Analysis of an Authority Issues Training Group**

by

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## **A Qualitative and Linguistic Analysis of an Authority Issues Training Group**

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Susan Dean Odom, Ph.D.

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Psychologists, psychotherapists, and others in the field of mental health research and practice often engage in ongoing training in order to increase both their professional skills and their self-awareness. One context for this training is an experiential training group. These groups often select a specific psychological process to study, and then use the here-and-now interactions in the group to gain awareness of the related emotions, thoughts, social processes, and behavior patterns. Members increase their knowledge through a unique combination of experience, observation, and analysis. The data for this study come from an experiential training group focused upon the authority issue, a complex psychological construct that refers to the ways in which members avoid (defend against) feelings of vulnerability in interpersonal relationships in which differences in power are perceived to exist.

This study is exploratory and descriptive. I use both qualitative research methods and computerized linguistic analysis to interpret a selection of transcripts from one training

group across a two and a half year period. Through multiple readings of the transcripts, triangulation through three different theories, consultation with experts, and the use of peer debriefers, four areas of interest emerge from selected transcripts. First, there is substantial evidence that this advanced group replicated the phases of development long theorized to exist in less advanced groups. Second, members demonstrated an ability to observe and articulate increasingly complex group interactions, thereby increasing their capacity to benefit from the experiential group process. Third, members explored the consequences of intra-group competition, perhaps using it as a defense against feelings of vulnerability. Finally, the linguistic analysis showed changes in language style over time.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Within the field of group psychotherapy, theorists and historians have identified four general types of groups: (1) clinical group psychotherapy, (2) therapeutic groups in mental health settings, (3) human development and training groups, and (4) self-help and mutual health groups (Scheidlinger, 2004). The data for this study come from the third type – a training group. More specifically, the data come from a group of professional psychotherapists receiving training in group dynamics.

Training groups are usually comprised of professionals or professionals-in-training. The structure normally consists of a combination of didactic and experiential sessions. The didactic sessions customarily address theoretical concerns, and the experiential sessions give participants the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of both group dynamics and the natural human responses to them. For example, during the experiential sessions used in the current study, members explore (among other things) their responses to both the leader's behaviors and to other members' attempts to dominate the group. They then use this knowledge to become more productive group members and more skilled group leaders.

Most of the published empirical research on groups emerges from studies in social psychology, education, marketing, sports, and business management. The bulk of empirical research on group experiential training for psychologists emerges from studies conducted at universities or from a few centers dedicated to the study of group dynamics. There is a large body of literature on group theory, and a relatively small but growing body of research on training groups for professional psychologists.

The quantitative research on psychology training groups has used a variety of methods to address various topics. Case studies are common. These research projects analyze brief

sections of one or two sessions and address such things as boundary issues and organizational dynamics (Klein & Gould, 1973). The use of pre-test and post-test scores on self-report inventories is also common. These studies have measured such things as the efficacy of different practices in groups (behavioral training vs. problem solving) (Magen & Rose, 1994) and changes in self-efficacy in graduate students who are training to lead psychotherapy groups (Choi, Price, & Vinokur, 2003). Researchers have also used multiple measures designs to study such things as correlations between attachment styles and the impact of different messages (Mallinckrodt & Chen, 2004). Comparative analyses of different types of groups have looked at such issues as whether highly structured versus relatively unstructured group result in more and deeper processing (McGuire, 1986). Similar to this research is outcome research that compares intervention or training methods with self-report outcome and self-efficacy measures (Haley, 2002).

Researchers have also used qualitative designs to investigate training groups. Most qualitative methods do not analyze the group data. Instead, researchers usually interview members after the group ends and then analyze the interview data, or they ask members to write about their group experiences and analyze the members' essays. Bieschke et al. (2003), for example, used qualitative methods to study the development of psychology students' responses to multicultural differences (Bieschke, Gehlert, Wilson, Matthews, & Wade, 2003). In this study, five multicultural process events were identified, and group interactions across an eleven week training period were then coded and counted.

The current study uses qualitative methods. It differs from the above-cited studies in that the participants in this group were highly skilled mental health care practitioners rather than graduate students, and the material for the study comes from a selection of actual transcripts from the group rather than the participants' reflection upon the group process. In addition, the group used in this study met for six weeks across a three-year period. This is a significantly longer period than other identified qualitative studies.



The data for this study are a sampling of transcripts from a group sponsored by the Systems-Centered Therapy and Research Institute (SCTRI). Yvonne Agazarian founded the institute and co-led the Authority Issues Group (AIG) upon which this study is based. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I present in brief information on Agazarian's theory of Systems-Centered Therapy (SCT) and the goals of the AIG. I then briefly review the developmental nature of groups and give a preview of Agazarian's theory of the phases of group development. This chapter also includes a rationale for the methodology used in this study.

### Systems-Centered Therapy and the Authority Issues Group

Agazarian established the SCTRI to promote empirical research in the effectiveness and application of the SCT group therapy techniques (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). Researchers are currently conducting or writing up several studies. At least two of the studies currently in press are outcome studies, and this current study is a qualitative analysis of the group process.

Dr. Agazarian conducted the first AIG in 1994 as a means of experientially exploring issues surrounding the participants' attitudes towards leadership and dependency (Agazarian, Byram, Carter, & Gantt, 2003). This work includes exploring how people externalize or assign authority and power to others. For example, in the group context, there is a designated leader. Members assume the leader has a level of expertise and they hold any number of assumptions about the leader's goal for the group, her responsibility to the members, and the role she will play during each session. How members think about themselves, how they interact with one another, and what they gain from the group experience largely depends upon these assumptions.

Multiple theories of group behavior, including SCT, assert that humans ward off fear of the unknown and existential anxiety by externalizing authority. Further, humans may derive a sense of safety through association with icons of power. The work of the AIG is to uncover the subtle and complex ways members externalize authority, how failures by external authorities to meet members' basic needs have shaped their lives, and the interpersonal dynamics and behavioral habits that arise out of these failures (personal communication, Syndor Sikes, Ph.D., February 2006.) According to Agazarian (2000), exploration of authority issues is essential to the success of group work. She asserts that members will always implicitly address differences in power (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). This process heavily influences the dynamic and changing forces active in any group.

### Group Phases of Development

World War II brought the concept of group dynamics to the forefront of scientific thinking as the military dealt with training large numbers of people (Ettin, Cohen, & Fidler, 1997). The focus on group dynamics provided the foundation for group-as-a-whole theory. Group-as-a-whole theory holds that the group is greater than the sum of its parts (Greene, 1999). A synergistic relationship exists in groups, wherein the combination of forces at work in any group is different from the sum of possibilities if each member were in isolation. Prevailing theory holds that groups, when viewed from the group-as-a-whole perspective, go through predictable phases of group development. Bennis and Shepard (1957), early researchers in group development, theorized that certain member behaviors – called defenses – characterize the different phases (Bennis & Shepard, 1957). Agazarian has made similar observations, but her many years of work with groups, her training in psychoanalysis, and her creative development of interventions have led to the development of a theory and practice based upon the modification of the behaviors characteristic to phases of group development (Agazarian, 2001).

According to Agazarian (2000), there are three major phases of development: the Authority Phase, the Intimacy Phase, and the Phase of Interdependent Work (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). These three major phases contain subphases and transitional phases. Broadly speaking, the Authority Phase contains the following: (1) the flight phase characterized by stereotypical social interactions, (2) a transitional subphase characterized by masochistic and sadistic behaviors, (3) the fight subphase with the associated power struggles, and (4) another transitional subphase wherein members resist making any psychological changes. The authority issues phase usually culminates in the “crisis of hatred.” During the crisis of hatred, members experience a deep hatred for authority figures, especially the group leader (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000).

The second, or Intimacy Phase, contains two sets of characteristic behaviors. The first is the enchantment subphase where members idealize their relationships with one another and the leader. The second subphase is disenchantment wherein members experience despair, distrust, and alienation (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). In the final phase of development, the Phase of Interdependent Work, members struggle to accomplish agreed-upon tasks. The behaviors associated with this struggle include an inability to make decisions, a rejection of knowledge, and a loss of common sense (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). I provide a detailed explanation of these phases below, and I compare the transcribed AIG data to these theoretical phases of development in the results section of this study.

## Description of this Study

One way to find out what happens in groups is to observe group behaviors as they occur, using a framework that allows the observer to make sense of the group events from moment-to-moment. The interpretation of group events rests heavily upon the framework used for sense-making and at least one study has shown that the presence of observers significantly and negatively affects the group functioning (Dies, Coche, & Goettelman, 1990).

Other methods, such as qualitative outcome and correlational studies, give researchers an idea of what results from a group, but not the process from which those results emerge. Qualitative research based upon interviews and retrospective essays give researchers an idea of what the members think about their group experiences. Only moment-to-moment analysis or a retrospective analysis of recordings can tell us what happens in groups, how the group events conform to or differ from theory, and what else might occur during the sessions.

The method I used involved reviewing group events retrospectively using transcripts of audio or audio-video recordings of group sessions. Employing qualitative methods, I identified patterns that emerged across the life of the group. Once I perceived a theme or pattern emerging, I consulted various theoretical discourses to understand it. For instance, I often researched Psychodynamic, Group Systems, and Systems-Centered theories to improve my understanding of group events. I chose the psychodynamic literature because it provides the foundation for most early work in group dynamics, including SCT. I chose the Group Systems theory because it provides the most extensive explanation of group dynamics. I chose the Systems-Centered theory because it was the group leader's theory and therefore likely framed the group. When I discovered themes in the group that other

disciplines address, such as social psychology, business management, education, or sports psychology, I accessed that literature to deepen my understanding of the relevant issues.

I also used peer debriefers to ensure that my interpretations of group events were reasonable given the data, and I consulted often with group psychologists who generously served as sounding boards and guides. The depth and breadth of knowledge accessed through the various literatures, the debriefers, and the consultants significantly adds to the credibility of this study.

### Organization of the Dissertation Document

The literature review contains an explanation of the theories that are essential to the understanding of the processes present in this study. This includes a brief review of some psychodynamic theory pertaining to group processes, a review of the Group-as-a-Whole theory, Agazarian's developmental model for groups, and a description of some of the behaviors that characterize the phases of development. This information is provided to give the readers a theoretical orientation to group processes. Without a doubt, the dynamics within a training group are very different from what most of us experience in everyday life. The members' behaviors are somewhat easier to understand if placed firmly in the context of group developmental theory.

I describe the qualitative methods used and address the issue of credibility of my research in the methods section. I also provide a detailed description of how I analyzed the data in this section. In the results section I describe three findings from this analysis, and address the results of the computerized linguistic analysis. The discussion section situates these finding within the current literature and summarizes how this study extends previous research.

## Purpose and Significance of This Study

The purpose of this study is dual. The first goal is to describe some of the group changes that occur across the three-year period of the AIG. Analysis of this group's transcriptions yields empirical information regarding participants' cognitive and affective experiences in a Systems-Centered group setting. The second goal of this research is to apply linguistic analysis to group longitudinal data. Researchers have conducted linguistic analysis on written essays and other archival written materials, transcripts of spontaneous verbalizations, transcripts of dyadic verbal interactions, and on computer-supported dialogues. This study is unique in that the object of investigation is a group of mental health professionals engaged in advanced experiential training. As such, this study may provide insight into the ways in which the use of language changes as a professionally trained population engages in complex psychological exploration.

This study has led to a greater understanding of the issues that emerge and the process of change that occur in the experiential training group context. This may be valuable information for researchers and clinicians who seek to develop methods that will enable client development. Some of the changes identified in this study correspond to the hypotheses asserted by the Systems-Centered theory upon which the group was established, and thus supports the theory. This study also provides an analysis of how group members develop a richer and more complex understanding of themselves and others in relationship to the issues of aggressive impulses, resistance to leadership, and avoidance of leadership roles.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Group dynamics are complex and difficult to grasp. This section contains information that is essential to understanding the results and discussion sections of this document. If the reader is already intimately familiar with group processes, a light skim of this section is probably sufficient. If the reader lacks this familiarity, a careful reading of this review of theory will greatly reduce the confusion and frustration that might otherwise occur.

This chapter presents an overview of the theories and models that have shaped modern thought regarding group processes. Theorists have based many of the theories of group behavior and dynamics upon psychodynamic theory and the group-as-a-whole model. The group-as-a-whole model purports that a group has an identity and dynamics that are not merely the sum of the individual members. Theorists believe that the group-as-a-whole exists because people act differently in groups than they do in isolation (Bion, 1961a) (Agazarian, 1997). This chapter also contains information about the Systems-Centered theory, group culture, and the SCT model of group development.

### Psychodynamic Theory of Group Dynamics

Agazarian based a great deal of her work upon the thinking characteristic of a psychodynamic understanding of psychological processes (Agazarian, 2001). This approach to group work focuses upon (1) the assumptions members make about the group leader, (2) the ways in which members avoid the explicit work of the group, (3) the communication process between members and between the members and the leader, and (4) attacks on the leader and peers (Dies, 1992). The group gives members an opportunity to compare their own assumptions with the assumptions of others, learn from one

another, and perhaps see for the first time the unique ways in which each member perceives and responds to the world (Dies, 1992) (Yalom, 1985).

Members of new groups typically want the leader to reduce the level of ambiguity in the group by indicating what the members should do. One of the explicit tasks of a training or psychotherapy group, however, is for members to explore their interpersonal styles and defenses. It is through experiencing frustration, expressing the frustration in interpersonal relationships, and then recognizing the consequences of that behavior that group members may arrive at insights about painful relationship patterns. Group members often gain insight into their feelings and behaviors, learn to tolerate frustration, and build problem solving skills.

If the leader fulfilled the members' initial wishes and reduced the ambiguity in the group, she would deny members the opportunity to explore their psychological and interpersonal processes. Moreover, the members would quickly see the leader's behavior as interference and become dissatisfied with the group experience. This dissatisfaction would lead the members to reject the leader without gaining insight into their motivations or psychological processes. Instead of setting up this dynamic, the experienced group leader silently creates a space for the group to find its own answers and become its own authority (Yalom, 1985). Although this process is very frustrating for members in the beginning, it leads to much greater personal development and group cohesion over time.

In group psychotherapy, verbalizations of the members' thoughts and emotions are the medium through which the work of the group is accomplished. The leader's role in a group is to pay attention to both the communication process and the content, with emphasis placed upon the process. Group theorists have long debated whether they should focus upon whichever individual is speaking in the group or the overall process – the group dynamics – that occur in each session. Many theorists believe that individuals



act differently in groups than they do individually and therefore paying attention to group dynamics, or the group-as-a-whole, is a more effective way of explaining group behavior and assisting individuals (Bion, 1961a) (J. E. Durkin, 1981b) (Ettin, 2000) (Yalom, 1985). The group-as-a-whole model answers a few key questions pertaining to the formulation of therapeutic interventions. First, the group-as-a-whole model identifies the system or the group-as-a-whole as the target of treatment rather than the individual (J. E. Durkin, 1981a)). The implication of this is that the leader intervenes in the group in order to shape the process of communication rather than attending to what members say. Second, the model postulates isomorphy, or that every subsystem in a hierarchy of systems operates and is affected in a similar way as every other in the hierarchy (J. E. Durkin, 1981a). This means that understanding the organization and processes of one level leads to understanding all the structures in that hierarchy of systems (H. Durkin, 1981). For example, the interactions between subgroups of members in the larger group mirrors the intra-psychic processes of the individuals (Bennis & Shepard, 1957), so if two subgroups within the larger group have assumed complementary social roles (a compliant subgroup and a defiant subgroup) it is likely that individuals also experience times when they feel compliant or defiant. Likewise, the resolution methods contained within a group are comparable to those available to the organization in which the group exists. For example, the group might find that becoming clear about group goals is a powerful first step to attaining them. This is true also for the larger organization that sponsors the group.

## Bion's Theories

Group-as-a-whole thinking comes largely out of the work of Bion. A social researcher, Bion was interested in the functioning of small and large groups of people. He studied changes in individual behavior resulting from group membership (Rioch, 1976). During the 1940s, when Bion was developing his theories of groups, researchers seldom explained individual behavior in terms of the social matrix in which the individual existed. Independence and individuality were prized and emphasized both in society and in the development of psychotherapy (Rioch, 1976).

Bion, through his group-as-a-whole theory, explicated an intimate relationship between the functioning of the individual and the culture in which that person lives. He placed the group itself as the center of the identity for all group members. Further, he proposed that the group must view members' neuroses as problems of the group if the group was to provide effective treatment (Bion, 1961a). Bion demonstrated that group members' neuroses "add to the difficulties of the community, destroying happiness and efficiency" and that, once displayed, the neuroses became the focus of the group (Bion, 1961a).

Bion (1961) observed that problems in a group parallel problems in society (Bion, 1961a)]. He believed the group should resist solutions that fail in society (such as punishment) and should instead become curious as to the real nature of problems. Only then, he proposed, could the group find a true solution. He urged group members to develop good common sense rather than simply acting out dysfunctional neurosis or role-type behaviors that stultify growth and change (Bion, 1961a). Bion also believed that a well-led group would provide members the opportunity to step out of the group process and look at group-as-a-whole behaviors. Given such opportunities, the group would become self-organizing and self-regulating (Bion, 1961a).

In addition to proposing that groups reflect society and that individual behavior arise out of the group context, system theorists such as Bion hold that members' intra-psychic transformations reflect those that occur at the group level (Ettin, 2000). This is not to say that every individual in a group changes in the same way, or that the group has the same influence on each participant. The particular forms of personal transformation vary from person to person according to their personalities, prior experiences, and existing schemata (Ettin, 2000). Individual group members will perceive and respond in very different ways to the issues brought up in the group based upon their prior experiences (Horwitz, 1995).

In order to explicate group-as-a-whole theories, it is sometimes useful to compare group-as-a-whole therapy to individual therapy. Many theories hold that, in individual psychology, the main agent of change is the relationship between the therapist and the client. These theories contend that clients grow and change as they discover and work through the transferences they make. In this case, transference refers to the assumptions, roles, and feelings the client brings into the relationship with the therapist. The behaviors expressed by the client toward the therapist often have less to do with the therapist than with the client's previous relationships. If individual therapy is successful, the client becomes aware of his or her transference reactions and begins to exercise more choice about how he or she behaves in relationship to others.

In the group setting, transference occurs not just between members and a leader, but also between members, so that one participant may come to symbolize a sibling, another a father, another a close friend, etc. Group participation becomes the medium through which the member can become aware of his or her habitual attitudes and behaviors (roles), responses to uncertainty or threat (defenses), hopes and fears, and interpersonal style. When the group responds with empathy, members become more willing to take risks. The group becomes a place of experimental interaction, filled with strong emotion and feelings of affiliation (Ettin, 2000). Bion (1961) states this concept beautifully when

he writes, “In the group the individual becomes aware of capacities that are only potential so long as he is in comparative isolation. The group, therefore, is more than the aggregate of individuals, because an individual in a group is more than an individual in isolation” (Bion, 1961a).

The issues encountered by the group-as-a-whole are the issues that each individual encounters in his or her life. The way that the group-as-a-whole attempts to solve problems is a reflection of how the members respond to similar issues outside of the group context. The work of each individual becomes the moment-to-moment interaction in the group. The members, not the therapist, bear the responsibility of creating a group context in which each individual's therapy takes place. The therapist can assist in this process by helping the members to relate their individual experiences to the experiences of the group-as-a-whole (Ettin, 2000). The therapist may highlight commonalities among the participants, thereby strengthening relationships within the group and increasing the members' abilities to open themselves to new information and insight (Piper, 1995).

Bion believed that for a group to exist, the members must share a function, goal, or task (Rioch, 1976). In group psychotherapy, two main functions or goals are usually the basis for establishing groups. Either the group is established as a way for the clients to participate in a therapeutic process, or the group is established to learn more about group functioning. In the second of these, members learn about group functioning through experiencing membership and then reflecting upon their experiences. Both types of groups usually involve considerable member frustration as the members struggle to loosen the hold of assumptions over their moment-to-moment experiences.

## Bion's Theories about Personal Dynamics in Groups

Bion (1961) observed that people have a wish to arrive fully developed and equipped to function in a group without having to undergo the pains of development and growth (Bion, 1961a). Even when the members are knowledgeable about group dynamics and have already developed a complex understanding of themselves and others, the desire to avoid the struggle of development still exists. Regardless of the time spent in groups, the here-and-now processing in a group repeatedly confronts members with the assumptions they make. This evokes strong feelings of frustration, hatred, and helplessness in the members, and both personal growth and greater understanding of group processes result from working through these feelings.

### Tolerating Frustration: Bion's Theory of Thinking

One major task of personal development is the ability to tolerate frustration. This skill is essential to working in groups, and it makes life outside of the group context much less stressful. Bion, perhaps the single most quoted person in group theory, had much to say about frustration and the ways people avoid it in groups.

Bion (1961) summed up the relationship between behaviors aimed at avoiding frustration and learning from experience in the article entitled A Theory of Thinking (Bion, 1961b). He said that when frustrated, people have the choice to learn to tolerate the frustration or to evade it. An incapacity for tolerating frustration, he said, usually results in evasive behaviors. Evasion reduces the capacity to problem solve. Often, people who try to avoid frustration confuse their feelings with the object or circumstance creating the feeling. Bion refers to this process objectifying frustration (Bion, 1961b). He contends that people either internalized as a bad self-object or externalized onto someone or something else

the source of frustration (Bion, 1961b). The internal or external bad object becomes fixed in the mind of the person, rendering him or her incapable of thinking logically or recognizing the difference between the targeted object and the feelings of frustration. This in turn results in a lack of ability to learn from experience (Bion, 1961b).

Sometimes the frustrated person can partially tolerate frustration (Bion, 1961b). Rather than being capable of solving the problem, this person tends to assume an omnipotent stance; he or she is morally right and the cause, as well as the feelings, of frustration are morally wrong (Bion, 1961b). The omnipotence response substitutes for adequate reality testing, rendering the person incapable of searching for and realizing aspects of reality and self that result in the feelings of frustration. This response also prevents the person from learning from experience (Bion, 1961b). According to Bion, an intelligent response to frustration requires a particular form of thinking (Bion, 1961b).

Bion (1961) defined “thinking” as the process of understanding the self and others. People accomplish Bion’s version of thinking by remembering, reflecting upon, attending to, investigating, and sustaining an attunement with meaningful and sometimes extremely painful emotional experiences (Gordon, 1994). Bion labeled this process as K, and its inverse as –K. K entails confronting painful experiences whereas –K is the human process of avoiding pain, and in extreme circumstances, hating emotion and any kind of emotional experience. The process of K necessarily entails being known by others. –K often entails avoiding emotional connection and intimacy. K involves doubt, –K certainty. K leads to recognition of inner and subjective as well as external and objective reality. –K is characterized by a rejection of reality, especially the reality of emotion, feeling, meaning, symbols, and interpersonal relationships (Gordon, 1994). It may be a natural human condition to possess urges to both K and –K, and early life experiences may lead each person toward one or the other as a predominant adaptive behavior. Entering into a group, especially an AIG, pushes members to develop the skills to practice K.

Developing the skills necessary for K results in an increase in knowledge about the self and therefore power over one's actions in interpersonal relationships.

### Power and Work in Groups: Regulating the Permeability of Boundaries

Cartwright and Zander (1968) wrote a seminal piece on the definition and dimensions of interpersonal and in-group power. One way in which they defined power is as agency, or the ability to influence or effect change in the thoughts, behaviors, or feelings of others (Cartwright & Zander, 1968). Agazarian defined authority (the person or persons who hold power) as the ability to accomplish work (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000) and she defined work as the transfer of knowledge, energy, and matter (Agazarian, 1997). Both General Systems Theory and Systems-Centered theory hold that, in a group, the regulation of boundaries is how one controls the transfer of energy or information, and this determines whether and how work is accomplished (J. E. Durkin, 1981b) (Agazarian, 1997).

In group psychotherapy, “boundaries” refers to the norms and psychological processes that determine the amount of information processed at any given time. If boundaries are too closed, the group stagnates in unproductive stereotypical social interactions or role-playing. This type of behavior is often labeled a type of resistance to treatment and it is typified by a cognitive rigidity that precludes genuine interaction and exploration (H. Durkin, 1981). If boundaries are too open, people experience instability due to overwhelming emotional experiences (H. Durkin, 1981). Members with too-open boundaries often feel flooded by undifferentiated emotions and feelings of helplessness. Members will express too-open or too-closed boundaries through defensive behaviors. The defensive behavior of someone with too open boundaries might be a habitual victim stance and dependence upon others or perhaps shyness with an inability to withstand

intimate relationships with others. If the boundaries are too closed, the person might exhibit over confidence and close-mindedness.

In the group context, members accomplish work by adjusting the boundaries so that an appropriate level of communication can occur in the group. SCT holds that all communications are comprised of two parts – information and noise. The leader tries to change the information to noise ratio (Agazarian, 1989) by reducing the noise in the communication system. Agazarian (1989) holds that noise in a communication system has two sources. The first source lies in the communication itself and usually occurs in the forms of ambiguity, contradiction, or redundancy. The second source of noise in the system stems from the level of dissonance between the new information coming into the system and the existing belief structures or schemata (Agazarian, 1989). In the latter case, the larger the dissonance between existing and new information, the greater the noise in the system and the greater the stress level experienced by group members (Agazarian, 1989).

Regardless of the source of the noise, reducing the noise level in communication increases the likelihood that the system will receive the new information (Agazarian, 1989). SCT theory holds that the most effective way of reducing the noise in a system is by reducing the members' defensive behaviors. Because of this, the SCT group leader pays more attention to *how members say things*, e.g. the amount of ambiguity, contradiction, and redundancy in the communicative act, than *what is said* (Agazarian, 1989). If redundancy or ambiguity is creating the noise, the leader encourages members to seek specificity by pointing out differences that members are ignoring. If contradictions are creating the noise, the leader intervenes by pointing out similarities in the apparently contradictory information (Agazarian, 1989). The ongoing work of the members of a group is learning to open or close the boundaries for themselves, and many group theorists hold that this happens in developmental stages.



## Agazarian's Phases of Development

Agazarian (1997) theorizes that specific stereotypical defensive behaviors characterize the early phases of group development, but as the group matures, members display fewer and different kinds of defensive behaviors (Agazarian, 1997). I have organized the following discussion of the theories regarding defensive behaviors by phases of group development. As mentioned in the introduction, according to Agazarian, there are three major phases of group development: (1) the Authority Phase, (2) the Intimacy Phase, and (3) the Interdependent Working Phase (Agazarian, 1997). Each of these major phases contains subphases.

The use of the rubric of phases of development inaccurately gives the impression that once a phase is experienced, the individuals never again exhibit the behaviors characteristic of that phase. This is simply not true; working through one set of defenses is no guarantee that the participants have grown beyond engaging in the related stereotypical behaviors. Mature group members can regress into earlier defenses as they re-experience fears or perceive threats that characterized earlier phases of development.

### The Authority Phase

The first phase of development, called the Authority Phase, consists of the subphase of flight, the transitional phase between flight and fight, the subphase of fight, and the transitional phase between the Authority Phase and the Intimacy Phase (Agazarian, 1997).

### The Flight Subphase

Members in the flight stage try to maintain their positive social images and avoid group conflict (Agazarian, 1997). Communications reflect stereotypical social patterns as members enact prescribed social roles. Often, the group will identify one member or subgroup as representing the group's sense of helplessness, and members will try to manipulate the leader into fixing this individual or subgroup. Members tend to distort or misinterpret events in the group, and often they forget, overlook, or ignore reality in an attempt to maintain peace in the group (Agazarian, 1997).

### The Transition from Flight to Fight

Theoretically, frustration characterizes the transitional phase between flight and fight as participants repress their growing feelings of anger and/or depression. If members do not express their frustration and anger toward others, depression usually results. If they express their anger and frustration, members often feel a great deal of righteous indignation and may vocalize sadistic and hostile fantasies. Agazarian (1997) posits that both depression and sadism are artifacts of the cognitive distortions used to avoid the anxiety present in the group (Agazarian, 1997).

### The Fight Subphase

According to Agazarian (1997), in the fight subphase members often engage in scapegoating behaviors and in social roles that repeat behavior patterns from the past. Members may find that they pair with another member in the group, each enacting an old behavior pattern and both supporting the other in the expression of these roles

(Agazarian, 1997). These relationships are called role-locks. They are very frustrating, and may fuel the rage and aggression that groups often express toward the leader in this phase of development.

Theorists have identified specific role-locks that commonly occur in groups. Many members adopt roles based on compliant or defiant behaviors. It is common for a compliant member to pair with and enter into a role-lock with a defiant member (Agazarian, 1997). For example, the compliant member might start crying during a session and express feelings of self-consciousness and guilt. The defiant member could then try to support the member while blaming the therapist or other group members for "making" the compliant member feel bad. When pairs form in a group, the maintenance of the pair relationship often supersedes any other goal in the group and the paired members dominate group interaction. Pairing often deeply affects other members, and research has shown that an active pairing greatly impairs interaction and exploration (Yalom, 1985).

### The Transition Phase between Fight and Intimacy

Agazarian (1997) believes that during the transition from the fight subphase to the enchantment subphase members become resistant to change, stubborn, and blaming. They tend to scapegoat authority figures. She holds that this is when the participants fully externalize onto the leader all of the responsibility for the discomfort present in the group as well as their feelings of anger and fear (Agazarian, 1997). They often verbally express sadistic impulses. Theoretically, the confidence gained through experiencing and expressing the sadistic impulses in a non-punishing environment can lead to a commitment to continued learning within the group context (Agazarian, 1997).

## The Phase of Intimacy

The Intimacy Phase contains two subphases: enchantment and disenchantment. In an ideal group dynamic, these subphases would work simultaneously by different subgroups (Agazarian, 2001). Under other conditions, the disenchantment subphase follows the enchantment subphase.

### The Subphase of Enchantment

During the enchantment subphase of development, members experience a sense of pleasant relaxation and idealization of others or the group context. Members often seek fusion with one another, and, if not checked, a cult-like atmosphere can develop (Agazarian, 1997). The experience of psychological fusion is so pleasant and seductive that there is little motivation for members to recognize the costs of enchantment: blocked personal and group development and a loss of autonomous functioning (Agazarian, 1997). Eventually participants feel they cannot be authentic in the group because of the demand for absolute harmony. The next developmental task is for members to struggle with how to maintain their identities as individuals while also establishing identities as group members (Agazarian, 1997).

### The Subphase of Disenchantment

Members report feeling anxiety, paranoia, and alienation during the disenchantment subphase (Agazarian, 1997). Mistrust of self and others pushes participants to withdraw from one another. Participants seek to maintain their independence, citing their pain or

fear of pain as a reason to maintain psychological distance from one another. Existential despair may lead the group members to seek isolation within the group context, and suicidal ideation can result if the despair is not properly contained in the group (Agazarian, 1997).

### Interdependent Work Phase

Members reach the Interdependent Work Phase as the group works through the existential despair at the end of the last phase. By this time in the developmental process, group members can recognize some of their defensive behaviors (Agazarian, 1997). They possess fairly accurate knowledge of their own and others' strengths and weaknesses. During all of the previous work, members have modified their defense mechanisms and gained the ability to perceive more clearly the ways in which they defensively and habitually misconstrue interpersonal interactions. The tasks in this phase of development mostly pertain to learning how to move the group towards accomplishing the group goals (Agazarian, 1997). Throughout the developmental process, members have become increasingly able to match their behaviors to the needs of the group. They have gained experiential knowledge of both stereotypical and functional roles and their relationship to the goals of the group.

### Agazarian's Observing System

In an SCT group, members develop an observing system, which is defined as a system to recognize subtle difference in experiences and to integrate this information into a more complex understanding of the self in the group. Experiences are perceived through both the comprehension and apprehension of events in the present context (Agazarian, 2001).

Comprehension is the more word-based knowledge that is “arrived at through [the] cognitive processes of knowledge and imagination,” and apprehension is the awareness of non-verbal, intuitive knowledge (Agazarian, 1997). Through the development of this observing system, members learn how to investigate the ways in which past painful experiences influence and shape current thoughts, feelings, and relationships. With this knowledge, they can then begin to establish interdependent relationships with others, explore with curiosity rather than fear the unknown aspects of themselves and others, and enjoy a life rich in meaning and emotion.

### The Authority Issues Group

The overarching result of developing Bion’s K or Agazarian’s observing system is that members gain a much greater awareness of the control they have in their lives. At least one research study provides empirical evidence of a shift in locus-of-control in training group participants (Lewis, Dawes, & Cheney, 1974) and other studies have shown that participants in training groups often gain an increase in confidence and sense of self-efficacy (Haley, 2002). Theory holds that members become authorities on themselves, and they are less likely to externalize authority. The AIG is an advanced group, and members have experience working through their defenses. Additionally, all participants in an AIG know and have, to varying degrees, internalized the methods and techniques used in SCT. Members in an AIG are dedicated to the idea of learning and practicing SCT methods and techniques, and the time and monetary costs associated with participating in an AIG are significant.

Participation in an AIG is one of the criteria for becoming a licensed SCT therapist. So the underlying motives for participating in an AIG might include licensure as an SCT therapist in addition to the goal of confronting personal issues around power and

authority. As a group, the AIG confronts each member's defenses around being subject to someone else's authority and exercising his or her own authority.

An AIG meets for one week, twice a year, for three years, for a total of six weeks of work and training. Although the transcripts of the sessions may not clearly reflect it, the work done in an AIG is very sophisticated. The members can accomplish the tasks of an AIG only if they possess expertise in addressing their defenses and working through the conflicts that emerge in group settings. In an AIG, members explore the defenses they use when they perceive differences in interpersonal power. It is thought that these defenses contain the members' feelings resulting from all of those instances when authority figures failed to meet their needs and expectations. It also contains the members' feelings about being depended upon by others (S. Cassano, personal communication, June 2003). The ultimate goal of this work is to take the energy of irritation, anger, and the other emotions associated with authority and have a choice about how to express the energy. Ideally, members will learn to direct this energy into accomplishing the work of the group (S. Cassano, personal communication, June 2003) rather than dissipating it through defensive behaviors.

### Accomplishing Work through Subgrouping

Discrimination is a term used in SCT that refers to the process of discovering, exploring, understanding, and labeling differences. Integration refers to the process of finding ways of expressing, or acknowledging without expressing, the impulses and feelings discovered through the discrimination process (Agazarian, 1999). Integration can include cognitively accommodating or assimilating information in a way that enables the person to access aspects of themselves. SCT theory holds that the discrimination and integration of differences is the way in which individuals and groups maintain physical and

psychological integrity, learn new ways of adapting to internal and external changes, and become more adaptable and complex in functioning. Functional subgrouping is the group behavior that supports the processes of discrimination and integration (Agazarian, 2001).

Subgrouping occurs when members who share similar affective experiences establish attunement with one another and explore the nuances of their shared experience (Agazarian, 2001). For example, a subgroup might form around feeling impatient with the pace of the group. Members who share this feeling will announce that they feel impatient, acknowledge others who feel the same way, and maintain eye contact with one another as they begin to describe what it feels like to be impatient. A relatively small degree of difference can be contained within a subgroup. The group members can integrate these small differences into the subgroup, thereby containing the differences (Agazarian, 2001). For instance, one member could describe feeling tension in her arms and hands. Another might not feel muscle tension, but may have the impulse to stand up. These are relatively small differences in the experience of impatience.

The degree of difference can be so great, however, that the subgroup cannot contain them. If this happens, the person or persons having the sufficiently different feelings can split off from the original subgroup and begin a new subgroup (Agazarian, 1997). So if a member announces he also feels impatient, but adds that he feels angry, too, the anger may be a sufficiently different experience that the impatient subgroup cannot contain it. In this case, the angry members could form an angry subgroup where they could explore their feelings of anger. Each subgroup takes its turn in exploring the feelings and emotions shared by its members.

Members often explore impulses to enact defensive, stereotypical behaviors in subgroups. In this way, subgroups eventually increase the members' ability to work together



(Agazarian, 2001). The other benefit is, of course, that each participant in the subgroups learns something about himself or herself (Agazarian, 1999).

Subgroups give members the opportunity to choose whether to join or maintain a subgroup, and therefore an opportunity to choose whether to feel and explore an emotion (Agazarian, 2001). Being aware of this choice is a new experience for many group members. The process of subgrouping increases awareness of self, choice, and others; it fosters simultaneous awareness of separation of self and joining with others (Agazarian, 2001). The tension between maintaining awareness of the self and connection with others discourages transference (Agazarian, 1997). Connection with others prevents members from withdrawing into themselves, losing the context of the group for a feeling, and acting out their transferences (Agazarian, 1997).

The discrimination process in subgroups establishes a pacing to the process of exploration that reduces the likelihood that intense emotions will overwhelm the members (Agazarian, 1997). The exploration in subgroups is supported by the awareness that each voiced exploration of feeling is being done not only for the self, but also for the group (Agazarian, 1997). Members may experience a social demand to contribute to the work of the group.

Inevitably, subgrouping is also about the boundary between what people choose to share and what remains private. Subgroups are the context in which the self-knowledge each individual holds about his or her experience is transported across the private-public boundary to become the property of the group. Those aspects of the private self that are not shared within the subgroup remain outside of the public boundary. The process of bringing personal information across the private-public boundary is at the heart of learning about interpersonal processes (Fidler, 1982).

The process of bringing information into the group can be complex. When members are able to adjust to the flow of information through the group, are comfortable with that process, make successful adjustments which deepen the work of the group, and share aspects of the self in a genuine manner, the group experience can be enjoyable and rewarding (Fidler, 1982). There exists a symbiotic growth between the group and the members. As the members make public their private selves (e.g., their current thoughts and reactions to the group, or the part of their pasts that directly relates to the current work of the group), the identity and complexity of the group grows. As the members share their private lives with one another, each member incorporates into himself or herself the group experiences, becoming more complex and more knowledgeable about the self and others.

When the subgrouping process fails, when compulsions are acted out in the group, and when mechanized defensive behaviors dominate group interaction, the task of the group in the here-and-now is frustrated (Fidler, 1982). The task of the group and the leader becomes bringing member attention to these dynamics so that the member can gain understanding and enter into subjective membership in the group (Fidler, 1982).

### Projective Identification

Understanding projective identification is essential to truly comprehending defensive behaviors and stereotypical roles. It is an interpersonal process in which people perceive in others aspects of themselves, and then react in a stereotypical manner (Horwitz, 1983). There are three steps to the process of projective identification. First, the projector rejects part of him- or her-self and manipulates the target into acting out that part. Second, the target acts out the projection while the projector in some way identifies with the feelings

or characteristics. Finally, and only if things go well, the projector then introjects or reabsorbs the feelings or characteristics (Ogden, 1982).

For example, if a person feels angry but cannot admit that she is angry or resolve the issue, she may project the feelings of anger into her husband. She begins to interpret his actions as indicating *he* is feeling angry; she becomes defensive. Not understanding his wife's defensive behavior, the husband is catapulted into a frustrated tirade. The husband's behavior validates the woman's projection onto her husband, and she remains convinced of the "accuracy of her perceptions."

If, on the other hand, the husband in this example is able to avoid these manipulations, and instead is able to help his wife recognize her own frustration, she might be able to introject a more mature approach to understanding herself and learning to respond more constructively to feelings of anger.

One wonders what would possess the recipient to adopt the contents of a projection. Often the projector selects a recipient who possesses a natural tendency toward the projected characteristics (Klein, 1975.). The projector then uses role suction to induce the target to act out the projected behaviors. Role suction is comparable to provocation – the projector acts out the stimuli that naturally provoke the target to feel and display the projected behaviors/characteristics (Horwitz, 1983). In this way, the projector pulls the recipient into identifying with and acting out specific, disowned aspects of the projector. Although the recipient may override these feelings with a stronger set of personality characteristics, many times the recipient partially or fully succumbs to the projection (Ogden, 1982). When the recipient is able to transform the projected feelings and express them in a more mature or healthier way, the projector can learn a different context for relating to or acting upon those feelings (Ogden, 1982). This process, called introjection, allows the projector to absorb and integrate into his or her repertoire of thoughts and

behaviors the transformed projection (Horwitz, 1983). If, however, the recipient is not able to transform the projected feelings in a mature and healthy manner, he or she may act them out in inappropriate ways. These behaviors then affect the projector, fueling future barrier experiences (Ogden, 1982). The recipient, in the meantime, often feels as though he has been manipulated (Bion, 1961a).

### Projections and Subgroups

In individual therapy, the therapist often is the target of members' projective identifications. One of the therapist's goals is to absorb and transform the projected material in a way that can allow the patient to introject a healthier and more mature aspect of themselves (Ogden, 1982). In groups, the subgroup may perform this same function by allowing subgroup members to project into the work of the subgroup those feelings or characteristics they wish to disown. The subgroup gives the members the opportunity to explore different aspects of the feelings or characteristics. The subgroup naturally dissolves when the introjection process is completed. If, however, the subgroup fails to form, the lack of containment may reinforce the projected feelings and beliefs. The projector may continue to experience an impoverished sense of self as well as a lack of energy (Ogden, 1982). Further, the failure experienced in the dysfunctional subgrouping process may reduce members' curiosity and sense of safety. This can result in a reduced motivation to participate in the group.

### Stereotypical and Functional Roles

All roles are known sets of behaviors. Agazarian (2001) believes there are two basic types: stereotypical roles and functional roles (Agazarian, 2001). Stereotypical roles are

fixed sets of behavior that are enacted without much consideration of their applicability to the specific circumstances. Functional roles are also sets of behavior, but they are enacted when appropriate according to context and the task (Agazarian, 2001). When enacting stereotypical roles, people can deny important parts of the self. Agazarian hypothesizes that in functional roles, members maintain awareness of the various aspects of their experiences, and indeed, awareness of the self is an important source of data (Agazarian, 2001). One important consequence of stereotypical role enactment is that these behaviors do not support growth and change. In fact, fixed roles keep the person from responding appropriately to changes in circumstance; stereotypical roles are a partial rejection of reality. Functional role enactment is flexible, allowing the person to maintain relationships while responding to the changing demands of context and task (Agazarian, 2001).

### Functional Roles

Within the SCT group context, there are three types of functional roles: the leader role, the member role, and the person role (Agazarian, 2001). In any SCT group context, all three are present (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000) but enacted with differing levels of skill and awareness. In the AIG, the people in the group are actively working to develop leader skills while maintaining awareness of their person and member roles (S. Cassano, personal communication, June 2003.)

#### Leader Role:

In the most general sense, the leader's role is to provide the conditions that increase the probability that members change behaviors and understanding (Gruen, 1981). The SCT

leader focuses on the subgroup and the group-as-a-whole as well as the individuals that comprise any subgroup. The leader listens to individual voices as a reflection of some part of the group dynamic; each member speaks for the group-as-a-whole (Agazarian, 1989). The therapist must determine on a moment-by-moment basis whether to focus on an individual, a subgroup, or the group-as-a-whole (Agazarian, 1989).

### Member Role:

Agazarian (2001) states that the task of a person desiring to be in a member role is (1) to share with the group the relevant aspects of his or her moment-to-moment experiences and (2) to be receptive to the affective states of others (Agazarian, 2001). In the member-role, the member has at least two reference points, the self and the sub-group or group in which he or she exists. This means that the member is mindful of his or her feelings as an individual while also maintaining emotional attunement with others. When members can do this, successful subgrouping follows. Eventually, subgroup members can also be aware of the subgroups' functions within the context of the group-as-a-whole (Agazarian, 1997). Members learn that their goals and perceptions change as they change roles; they learn to look at events in a way that allows them to take in experiences from different perspectives (Agazarian, 1997). They also learn to direct their attention toward what they want to learn more about. This can become the basis for choosing when and how to subgroup (Agazarian, 2001). Most often, as explained below, leaders tend to ask people to vector their attention and energy to those thoughts and behaviors that most impede their ability to work (Agazarian, 2001).

### Person Role:

A person's awareness of him or her self as the practical reference point for thoughts, feelings, valuations, and behaviors characterize the person role (Agazarian, 1997). The person in person-role tends to take things "just personally" as it relates to his or her past experiences, sense of self, and perceived relationship with others. In this role, the person often takes things out-of-context, mistaking thoughts for feelings and feelings for facts (Agazarian, 1997). In person role, also, the person is likely only to be open to information that confirms the existing convictions and beliefs (Agazarian, 2001) (see Barrier Experiences, below.) In this case, the likelihood of change is small. SCT theory holds that this type of self-centeredness causes much of the personal and interpersonal pain experienced in life and in relationships (Agazarian, 1997).

### Member Roles and SCT Structure

By definition, functional roles are tied to context and task (Agazarian, 2001). Benne and Sheats (1948) state that three types of member roles make a group functional. The first set of roles involves the task of identifying and accomplishing the group goal. They list twelve different roles people may adopt in fulfilling this first group task, including initiator-contributor, information seeker, opinion seeker, information giver, opinion giver, elaborator, coordinator, etc. (Benne & Sheats, 1948). In SCT, the twelve roles identified by Benne and Sheats pertaining to goal accomplishment are largely achieved through the subgrouping process. The explicit goals for an SCT group are usually set before the group convenes; the type of group defines the explicit goals. For example, in an SCT processing group, the goal is for members to explore their defenses. In a training group, the goal is to explore defenses and learn SCT theory. In the AIG, the goal is to explore defenses relating to power and authority and to develop leadership skills. The implicit

goals of the group and the activities pertaining to giving and receiving information are contained within the subgrouping process. The highly structured SCT format accomplishes many of the coordination activities for the group.

The second overall group task identified by Benne and Sheats (1948) is to “strengthen, regulate, and perpetuate the group as a group” (Benne & Sheats, 1948). The seven member-roles listed under this overall task include the (1) encourager, (2) harmonizer, (3) compromiser, (4) gatekeeper and expediter, (5) standard setter or ego ideal, (6) group observer and recorder, and (7) follower (Benne & Sheats, 1948). These roles most closely align with particular practices within the SCT group or the Systems-Centered culture. For example, SCT emphasizes time and space boundaries; these conventions serve the gatekeeper function. The leader also attends to space boundaries by helping members direct their energy into the here-and-now of the group. Each SCT processing session ends with a particular practice in which members identify what surprised them during the session, what they learned, and what they found satisfying or dissatisfying. This practice serves the group observer and recorder functions. An SCT group encompasses Benne and Sheats’ standard setter role through successful subgrouping, and the ego ideal in an SCT group changes over the life of the group as members mature and take up their authority. Certainly, the group leaders serve as the ego ideal in the beginning. SCT theory serves as a kind of super ego. Both the leader and the experience of functional subgrouping provide encouragement to the members.

The third set of roles identified by Benne and Sheats (1948) is referred to as “individual” roles. These roles include the aggressor, blocker, recognition-seeker, self-confessor, playboy, etc. (Benne & Sheats, 1948) and are identified in SCT as defensive or stereotypical behaviors enacted in the group in service of individual needs.



The ultimate benefit of working through the unconscious assumptions that give rise to stereotypical role behaviors is, of course, a heightened ability to function in the world outside of the group context. According to Ezriel (1950):

“By allowing him [the member/patient] through a non-directive technique to display these [stereotypical roles] in the transference, we get into the position of freeing him from the unconscious phantasies which determine, or at least contribute to, his behavior in outside situations. We thus enable him to make a decision based on an assessment of the real situation free from the influences of unconscious fears” (Ezriel, 1950, p. 69).

Gaining this freedom is often blocked by what Agazarian calls a barrier experience. Members spend considerable time working to understand their barrier experiences and breaking free of the limitations imposed by them.

### Barrier Experiences

A barrier experience is an acute instance of a person making assumptions about reality based on past experiences rather than current information. Agazarian (1997) describes a barrier experience as an instance:

“...when members take things just personally ... there is a transfer into the present of earlier role-locks in relationship to authority and intimacy. While members are in a barrier experience, that experience is their reality, and they have no choice but to act out in their behavior the cognitive misconstructions that fuel the experience” (p. 287.)

In fact, the barrier experience seems so “real” that the person will reject both any information that would disconfirm the assumptions and any part of the self that conflicts with the stance taken in the barrier experience. For example, if a person enters into a barrier experience based upon the assumption that he or she is a helpless victim, he or she will shun any personal resources that could allow self-determination. Perhaps the most damaging result of a barrier experience is that the person rejects important parts of himself or herself, thus greatly reducing the chances of a different, disconfirming experience. Maintaining awareness of the shunned parts of the self is difficult and takes practice.

Old stories about past traumatic interpersonal interactions often maintain barrier experiences. These old stories, and the barrier experiences they support, enable the members to see themselves as all-good victims, often resulting in feelings of outrage accompanied by a lack of responsibility for change. This mindset prevents members from perceiving important information. They are thus less likely to enjoy healthy and rewarding relationships in the present and future.

In order to let go of the old stories and resist barrier experiences, the members most likely have to work through long-avoided pain – pain so profound that it precipitated a deep and lasting change in self-perception, perception of the world, and the relationship between the two. Gaining release from a barrier experience empowers the member to access more freely different parts of him- or her-self, and the tendency toward either self-criticism or guardedness toward others can begin to lessen. The likelihood of entering into rigid relationships based upon past experiences, or role-locks, is greatly diminished.

## Role Locks

A role-lock between two or more people occurs when the people assume complementary and mutually reinforcing roles relating to issues of power and authority (Agazarian, 1997). The roles usually center on a one-down position of victim or the one-up positions of bully or stubborn, uncooperative member (Agazarian, 1997). Being in role is a way to escape fully engaging in the power dynamics present in the group (Agazarian, 1997). The feeling of a role-locked relationship is often irrational. It has little to do with the stated task of the group, and everything to do with establishing strong defenses against perceived threats.

The work of undoing role-locks lies in identifying the triggers that evoke a particular role and then recognizing the costs associated with this type of behavior (Agazarian, 1997). The result of emerging from a role-locked relationship is that the members can fully realize their own experiences in the group and begin to re-integrate the shunned parts of the self. They have the opportunity to create the types of relationships they desire instead of repeating old, painful relationships or failing to explore the feelings that they avoid through the role relationship.

Once members emerge from role-locks, the feelings of freedom can be heady and somewhat frightening, frightening in the sense that members may feel awkward in their first attempts to establish relationships that are not based upon old patterns of behavior. And getting in touch with disowned parts of the self can be disquieting.

## Understanding the Actual Behaviors in an SCT Group

Many of the member behaviors in an SCT group appear very strange to people who have not experienced a group or who are not familiar with group dynamics. Even with a theoretical orientation to group processes, the actual group experience is quite different from common expectations. We live in a culture dedicated to the suppression of emotion except in very specific and delimited forms: music, movies, sports, and a few others. Through these contexts, people can vicariously experience and express feelings of aggression and hatred (sports), intense love and intimacy (music and movies), and existential fear (a horror show.) Because of cultural limits, people seldom have the opportunity to experience the nuance of their feelings, to accept them as part of being human, and to learn how to use the energy of these feelings for positive personal and social development.

Expressing emotions interpersonally can lead to shame and social sanction. But in groups, exploring these powerful emotions is an expected part of learning about the self. It is common, for instance, for subgroup members to pour a great deal of energy and enthusiasm into the exploration of socially unacceptable and somewhat alarming emotions such as raw aggression, sadism, castration anxiety, fusion fantasies, and paranoia.

### Group Aggression

When people become frustrated they often feel anger, hostility, or in extreme forms, rage. It is common for people to fear these feelings, and many people are unable to differentiate between feeling something and acting it out (Agazarian, 1997). Agazarian (1997) posits that exploring aggressive impulses in subgroups enables group members to differentiate between many different but associated feelings, between the emotions and

the physiological sensations that accompany them, and between thoughts and action. This process of differentiation helps members accommodate the feelings so that members are not overwhelmed or driven to express them in destructive ways (Agazarian, 1997).

When members verbalize their feelings of anger and sadistic fantasies, they often feel a mixture of pleasure, guilt, horror, and power (Agazarian, 1997). Although feelings of vibrancy and power are often the first reaction, members quickly recognize that the target of these fantasies (usually the group leader) is a feeling human being. Our culture prohibits the expression of these feelings, but within the context of an SCT group, members can explore primary aggression without the shame and social sanction. During this processing, members recognize that the sadism is an artifact of human aggression, the product of a projective identification. Eventually, members can reconcile their conflicting feelings between sadism and compassion, feeling powerful and fear of punishment, and between pleasure and pain (Agazarian, 1997). This work enables members to recognize their impulse to retaliate against those who disappoint or hurt them, and it gives members choice in expressing anger in response to perceived injustices.

Other group theories account for group aggression and the retaliatory impulse in slightly different ways. A more purely psychoanalytical approach posits that the members transfer onto the group leader the image of the preoedipal mother. The leader resembles the preoedipal mother in that she sometimes points out dysfunctional behavior, perhaps even chastising or shaming members in the process (Durkin, 1964). Group members often become increasingly irritated with the leader's interventions (Durkin, 1964). While irritated with the leader, the person-as-group-member also perceives the self as dependent upon the leader for his or her membership/existence. This forces the members, as it does the adolescent child, into submissiveness as well as a hatred for his or her necessary dependence upon the leader (Durkin, 1964).

While in this phase of development, it becomes abundantly clear that there is a qualitative difference between the member's perception of the self and the leaders – the members perceive the leader as having knowledge and power that the member does not. Humans may possess a narcissistic fear of anyone different from the self. Members can experience this fear as hatred for the more powerful leader in the group context (Durkin, 1964).

Existential theory holds that helplessness is the shadow side of omnipotence. Feelings of perceived helplessness often result in intense rage and profound shame. Kauffman (1994) replaces the leader-as-preoedipal mother with the concept of group thanatropics, or the group experience of loss, grief, guilt, and shame resulting from the inevitability of death (Kauffman, 1994). He proposes that group aggression and shame or guilt are signs of group mourning resulting from annihilation anxiety. At first, the group has difficulty in containing this anxiety. Then, as the group develops skills and trust, members develop a limited capacity to contain the negative affect. Once the group achieves at least partial containment of these feelings, members can experience a great deal of sadness as they mourn the human condition. When the group encounters this level of affect, members can begin to process profound losses in their lives (Kauffman, 1994). Often, they express these feelings through relating feelings of abandonment and profound loss to the mechanized defenses that they expressed early in the life of the group (Kauffman, 1994).

### Castration Anxiety

Anxiety and paranoia are common experiences in groups. Sometimes members express this through feelings of castration anxiety. The original understanding of castration anxiety, developed by Freud, related to a fear of actually being castrated (Friedman, 1952). Psychoanalysts have updated the theoretical construct of castration anxiety. Now it is related to the idea that as one matures, the complex, gendered self becomes

embodied and thus what one has to lose evolves throughout the maturation process. Threat to any crucial part of the mature psyche can evoke castration anxiety (Fogel, 1998). Castration anxiety can be part of the natural process of growth, as transformations occur in the internalized sense, as intrapsychic processes change, and as patterns of interpersonal relatedness become less defensive and more complex (Fogel, 1998). Fogel (1998) further suggests that the invocation of such well-worn concepts as castration anxiety in the therapeutic context can be a regression and defense against internal, intrapsychic, and relational losses (Fogel, 1998).

### Predatory Sadism and Fusion Fantasies

Feelings of anxiety are often associated with both the desire to fuse psychologically with a more powerful figure and a desire to destroy that figure (Klein, 1975). In psychoanalytical contexts, feelings of predatory sadism and the sexual desiring of the leader by group members relate to regression to an infantile state and wanting to fuse (Klein, 1975). Klein (1975) hypothesizes that the desire for love and fusion is rooted in anxiety and she believed that the capacity for simultaneous feelings of love and destruction are innate (Klein, 1975).

### Paranoid Fantasies

As the group matures, the fear may arise in response to the new knowledge, habits, or relational patterns being developed in the group (Tubert-Oklander & Hernandez de Tubert, 2004). As groups develop and the members move beyond the comfort of familiar defensive patterns of behavior, it is very likely that members feel threatened. Whereas role relationships are predictable and therefore relatively safe, non-role-bound

relationships are not predictable. By definition, they call for interactions that are more authentic. As a result, feelings of vulnerability and anxiety may become activated.

A second threat may occur when members begin to see the leader as less powerful and all-knowing than first imagined. Although members will undoubtedly continue to view the leader as an expert and reliable resource, she may slip from the exalted, idealized position projected upon her as members begin to take up their own authority. These two sources of fear may give rise to paranoid anxiety and the projection of paranoid fantasies.

### The Effects of Paranoia in the Group

It is natural that members might begin to feel alarmed at many of the changes that occur across the life of a three-year-long group. This alarm cause feelings of defensive aggression and the felt sense may be a fear of being harmed by the aggressive behaviors of others – a type of paranoia. Paranoia is a projection, and perhaps projective identification, of aggression (Tubert-Oklander & Hernandez de Tubert, 2004). In other words, members perceive someone else in the group as targeting the self with the unexpressed and unacceptable aggression they themselves feel. This defense stops the change process by drawing the member away from full participation in the group. Paranoid members spend time thinking about their vulnerabilities, devising strategies to escape being targeted, feeling like a victim, and so on. The leader's role becomes uncovering the extent of the paranoia and helping members explore the anxieties that underlie the paranoid projections (Agazarian, 1997).

Agazarian (1997) describes paranoid anxiety as a form of resistance to change that leads the paranoid member(s) to a choice of either stubbornly clinging to the paranoid fantasy or giving expression to that part of the self that meets the new and unknown with courage



and curiosity. If members choose the latter, the energy of the stubborn resistance is thought to be transformed into a tenacity to learn and grow in the group context (Agazarian, 1997). Functional subgrouping is a useful container for processing the paranoia present in the group (Agazarian, 1997). Through exploration of the paranoid dynamic, members explore, discriminate, and perhaps eventually integrate their projections. This can result in a more complex understanding of themselves and the way they interact with others. The leader, in the meantime, normalizes the discomfort experienced by the subgroup members and casts it as a consequence of doing valuable work (Agazarian, 1997). Placing a label on and value in the feelings and discomfort helps the members enter into the subgroup process at a deeper level. It is interesting to note that paranoia often emerges when competition is imminent or when power relationships within a group begin to change (Kernberg, 1993) (Motherwell & Shay, 2005).

### Summary

This chapter provides the reader with a very basic idea of group dynamics from psychodynamic, group-as-a-whole, and Systems-Centered perspectives. Bion's theory of thinking and Agazarian's work on the observing system give an idea of the work that lies ahead for the members of this AIG. Theory holds that the group will proceed through sequential phases of development. Through the work in subgroups, members will likely come face-to-face with their projections and defensive role behaviors. Various models predict that members will express aggression toward one another and the leader. These models also state that members will experience considerable anxiety and they will attempt to assuage their anxiety through a sequence of defenses. In the results section of this document, I provide information about how members in this AIG group express various defensive behaviors as they proceed through the phases of group development. I also provide information of the skills the members develop across time.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

I conducted an in-depth analysis of an advanced training group for mental health care professionals. The Systems-Centered Therapy and Research Institute sponsored the group and conducted the group according to the SCT model. The group met for one week, twice a year, for three-years. The data for this study are selected transcripts of archival audio recordings. The primary research methods used are descriptive and qualitative. I have also analyzed the transcripts using a computerized linguistic analysis program, Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC).

### The Authority Issues Group

#### The Context

An AIG is a formal, closed, three-year-long group which was formed for the expressed purposes of (1) giving the participants the context in which to process dependency issues in relation to giving and taking authority, and (2) preparing the participants to work with clients doing this same level of work. Only people who have extensive training and experience in the SCT model are eligible to participate in an AIG.

#### AIG Schedule

A typical AIG group meets twice a year, in the spring and winter. Each group runs for three years, meeting a total of six times. The data used for this study is from a group that started in November of 2000 and ran through April 2003. Dr. Yvonne Agazarian, Ed.D. and Susan Gantt, Ph.D. co-led this group. The first week of data, collected in November

2000, was not included in this study. Member count was low in the first week and judged not to be representative of the work done in the remaining sessions.

### In-Group Behaviors

The November meetings were comprised of nine experiential training sessions and seven sessions providing didactic training or discussion. The April meetings were comprised of ten experiential training sessions and ten sessions of didactic training or discussion. The leaders conducted each experiential session in a similar manner. When the session begins, members sit in a circle and adjust their chairs so that they can see one another. The leader or a peer-leader then asks if anyone in the group has a distraction that is keeping them from being attentive in the group. If someone has a distraction, the group works with the member to resolve the issue. If no one has a distraction, members indicate their readiness to work by stating, “I’m here” or a similar phrase. Once everyone has stated their readiness to work, the leader initiates the work in the group with the simple phrase, “Let’s subgroup.” The leader does not present an agenda for the experiential sessions, and the members are free to pursue issues as they arise in the moment-to-moment interaction in the group. The members focus on their present experiences in the group – the flow of emotions, physical sensations, and impulses in each moment. Unlike traditional individual psychotherapy, members in SCT groups do not normally talk about events in the past, relationships outside of the group context, what their thoughts are on a topic, or common conversational processes. The length of an experiential session lasts from one to almost two hours.

During the last ten minutes of each session, members switch from describing their experience to identifying the things that surprised them during the sessions, lessons they

learned, and experiences they found satisfying and dissatisfying. Members call this process “surprises and learnings.”

Despite the fact that the leader does not determine the topics discussed in each session, the sessions are highly structured. Some behaviors are encouraged in the group, and the leader immediately discourages others. The discouraged behaviors are those that distract the members from the moment-to-moment flow of experience. For example, intellectualizations are discouraged because they pull the member into thinking rather than feeling. Asking questions is discouraged because they often are used to shift responsibility onto someone else or distract others. Changing the subject is seen as a way of avoiding an issue. Likewise, negative predictions about the self, complaining, blaming, acting out a victim role, sarcasm, and attempting to “fix” others are all examples from a long list of discouraged behaviors. Agazarian theorizes that these behaviors are ways to defend against in-the-moment feelings (Agazarian, 2001).

The members of the group speak openly about their feelings. To people outside the group, the things members say while in the group can sometimes seem petty, self-absorbed, offensive, and/or outrageous. Members share a very specific language that allows them to communicate in a sort of verbal shorthand. The meanings of most of the terms are very complex. A person who is not familiar with the specialized language and concepts will likely find the transcripts confusing.

The members do not have the goal of being efficient in the business sense of the word. Instead, they work at deepening their understanding of human nature, their interpersonal patterns, and group dynamics. This sometimes means that members refuse to foreclose on a topic, or delay making what seems to be a relatively simple decision, in order to explore the nuanced feelings around it. Groups theories in general hold that there is a meaningful

difference between knowing something intellectually and knowing something based upon experience.

### The Participants

All of the participants in this AIG were mental health care professionals or were in a religious ministry. Demographics were reported on a total of twelve women and eleven men, for a total of 23. One of the participants in the first week never returned, reducing the total to 22. I do not know which set of demographics belong to the member who did not return to the group. All but one of the participants reported their level of education; all held advanced degrees. All but four members reported their age. Ages ranged from 38 to 59. Two members were of African descent, the rest were Caucasian. Of all of the members, nine men and nine women had gone on to participate in a Licensing Group, the next step in SCT training.

The AIG is a closed group. Once the membership stabilized (week two, in this case), members make a commitment to the group, and new members are not allowed to join.

### Training Requirements

The participants must meet certain training requirements within the SCT organization in order to attend an AIG. The first training step is to participate in a SCT Foundations class and an ongoing SCT training group or other SCT training context for a sufficient amount of time to qualify to join an SCT intermediate training group. The trainee and his or her mentor conjointly decide when the trainee should transition from a beginning training group to an intermediate training group. The second step is to complete the SCT

Intermediate Skills Training. People at this level of training also work in an SCT theory group and an on-going SCT consultation group. The third step is to complete the SCT Intermediate Mentor Training, which prepares participants to manage themselves in relation to the changing roles and goals inside an SCT group (Agazarian, 2003). The training through all three steps takes a minimum of two years, but most people take considerably more time in mastering the skills presented in these contexts (Gantt, Susan, private communication, August 2003).

## Procedure

### Sample Selection

As stated previously, 23 people attended this AIG group. However, not all members attended every meeting. Only eleven people attended the first week, and of these eleven, only ten completed the entire three-year obligation. I decided to drop the data collected from the first week due to the low turnout. An average of 20 people attended the last five weeks of the group, with attendance ranging from 16 to 22. Median attendance during this five-week period was 22.

I used only a sampling of the data from the experiential training sessions for this research study. The criteria for selecting the included sessions are as follows:

- (1) Select the same sessions across all April sessions and across all November sessions to increase the chance of detecting patterns across the weeks.

(2) Do not select sessions close to the very beginning of each week when the group is more likely to be unstable and when the group's work is most likely to be unrepresentative of the kind of work that the group normally does.

(3) Select a pattern of sampling that will optimize capturing the work across time.

Accordingly, the following sessions were selected for this study:

Table One: Data Sampling

|            |               |                               |
|------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| Week One   | May 2001      | sessions two, six, and ten    |
| Week Two   | November 2001 | sessions three, six, and nine |
| Week Three | April 2002    | sessions two, six, and ten    |
| Week Four  | November 2002 | sessions three, six, and nine |
| Week Five  | April 2003    | sessions two, six, and ten    |

Once the sessions were selected, I then chose which portion of each session to include in the study. I wanted session portions that represented stable work. The beginning of each session tends to be fragmented slightly more than later in the sessions. Once the group “warms up,” members tend to participate in group processes more effectively. The last ten minutes of each training session are spent processing participants' surprises and learnings. The SCTRI transcribed the last thirty minutes prior to surprises and learnings for each of the selected sessions for use in this study.

I sampled 15 sessions. Each sample, except one, was 30 minutes long. One session transcript was short, approximately 23 minutes. Of the 15 session transcripts, two were full of errors and the audiotape quality so poor that corrections were impossible. I discarded these two transcripts. The final data set includes the following sessions:

Table Two: Viable Samples

|            |               |                               |
|------------|---------------|-------------------------------|
| Week One   | May 2001      | sessions two, six, and ten    |
| Week Two   | November 2001 | sessions three, six, and nine |
| Week Three | April 2002    | sessions two and six          |
| Week Four  | November 2002 | sessions three, six, and nine |
| Week Five  | April 2003    | sessions two and ten          |

The cleaned transcripts totaled 225 pages of raw data.

### Labeling the Sessions

As mentioned earlier, the AIG actually began in November of 2000 and met every six months for three years. I did not include the November 2000 data in this study. I judged the week unrepresentative of the overall work of the group because of low attendance. I also only sampled sessions from the remaining weeks. Because of the excluded week, the labeling of the weeks can get a bit confusing – the first week included in the study is actually the second week of the group. To prevent any misunderstanding, I have adopted the following labeling conventions:



Table Three: Session Labeling Convention

| Reference Used               | Week by Date  | Session Numbers                            | Reference Used                |
|------------------------------|---------------|--|-------------------------------|
| None – not included in study | November 2000 | N/A  | N/A                           |
| Week One                     | May 2001      | sessions two, six, ten                     | sessions two, six, ten        |
| Week Two                     | November 2001 | sessions three, six, and nine              | sessions three, six, and nine |
| Week Three                   | April 2002    | sessions two and six (session ten dropped) | sessions two and six          |
| Week Four                    | November 2002 | sessions three, six, and nine              | sessions three, six, and nine |
| Week Five                    | April 2003    | sessions two and ten (session six dropped) | sessions two and ten          |

Analyzing the Data on the Group-as-a-Whole Level

As mentioned in the literature review, various group theories, including SCT, hold that the behavior expressed and the experiences perceived by participants in a group have more to do with the group's dynamics than it does with the individual's personality or dynamics (Agazarian, 2001). The nature of the session recordings also made it difficult to identify which member was speaking at any given time. Transcribers could confidently identify those times when one of the co-leaders spoke, and whether the member speaking is male or female. Given the theory pertaining to group dynamics and the difficulty of reliably identifying members, I decided to look at the data in the group-as-a-whole context for this study.

### Cleaning the Transcripts

I began work with the transcripts by comparing each transcript to the relevant audio recording. I performed this comparison a minimum of three times per transcript. During these reviews, I corrected the transcripts and added punctuation to clarify meanings. Some transcripts occasionally contained member names, and I deleted them in order to maintain member anonymity and to make the transcripts consistent.

### Reading the Transcripts

After cleaning the transcripts, I carefully read them in sequence multiple times to get a feel for the occurrences in each session and changes over time. Each reading informed the subsequent readings, and in fact, each transcript influenced the interpretation of all other transcripts. Only through multiple readings and placing each transcript within the context of the others could I trust that I understood the work in each session. Because of the complexity of the transcripts and their unusual nature, the process of multiple readings, interpretations, questioning, re-reading, checking theory, etc. took a great deal of time. I spent in excess of 18 months engaged in this preliminary review of the documents. Over this 18 + month period, my understanding of the transcripts changed dramatically.

### On Credibility or Internal Validity

Qualitative research is different from quantitative, and the internal credibility or validity of a qualitative study cannot be established using quantitative methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the context of qualitative research, researchers talk about potential

types of understanding, such as descriptive, theoretical, or evaluative (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Depending upon the circumstances of the study, certain activities can help ensure the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative researchers routinely use prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation, among other research techniques, for this purpose (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Prolonged observation usually refers to the researcher staying in the field and in contact with the research subjects long enough to understand the context of events. In this study, which used archival data, prolonged observation became spending adequate time with the source data to understand them. This entailed letting each reading of each session's data inform the interpretation of all other sessions, and engaging in multiple ways with a variety of information sources to help ensure comprehensive understanding of the group processes. One of the benefits of prolonged engagement is that the researchers overcome pre-existing prejudices (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Certainly, multiple readings of the transcripts revealed the prejudices I had upon first reading of the data. Persistent observation involves focusing on the items that are important, discounting the irrelevant and paying attention to the atypical events to see if they are important to understanding the events in the data set (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My critical approach to the data, excellent observation notes, and attention to detail provide documentation of my persistent observation.

Triangulation is another way to support credibility. This usually refers to multiple sources, methods, investigators, or theories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I had only one source of data – the transcripts. The only way I could triangulate was through investigating the data through multiple theoretical lenses. Some qualitative researchers consider triangulation through multiple theories less powerful than multiple sources or researchers. I provide a detailed account of the ways I engaged in triangulation below.

Finally, peer debriefing and communicating with experts are methods used to substantiate a study's credibility. I used both these methods (see details, below.) Member checks of findings are another method for verifying research findings. The only viable way of performing checks on interpretations of data processed at a group-as-a-whole level was to consult with group experts, which I did.

### Triangulating My Interpretations with Theory

After multiple readings, I identified specific themes that occurred in each transcript. Once I identified a theme, I researched it through Psychodynamic, General Systems, and Systems-Centered theories. If the theme was novel to these theories, I pursued understanding it through other relevant psychological discourses. For example, the issue of competition *within* training groups did not appear in any of the searches I conducted, but research on competition *between* different groups appeared in social psychology publications. I used this research to get a better sense of the theories relating to and the empirical research performed on competition.

### Consulting with Debriefers

The debriefers' role is complex and greatly influences the credibility of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The first debriefing role, and perhaps most important, is to question the researcher's assumptions and biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was an essential part of the process in this study simply because the SCT culture is complicated, the group language is unique to SCT, and assumptions are pervasive in the group. These assumptions can easily influence later interpretations of group events. The debriefers helped me articulate both the assumptions I made about the data and the assumptions

active in the group. They also pushed me to explain the SCT-specific jargon and identify those times when alternative theoretical explanations could be useful. The debriefers prevented me from accepting some ideas at face value, and they pointed out when I was stubbornly refusing to see the obvious.

The second task for the debriefers is to be a sounding board for the researcher as she develops insights, wrestles with interpretations, or proposes hypotheses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The debriefers in this study excelled in active listening as I developed insight into the group processes. They pointed out when I was contradicting myself, and helped me articulate possible hypotheses as they arose from the interpretations.

The third task of the debriefer is to challenge the researcher on the methods used, perhaps suggesting additional ways of looking at the data or questioning her methodological design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The debriefers involved in this study are well educated and experienced in qualitative methods. They provided numerous suggestions and references about methodology, pushed me to refine my thinking, and urged me toward higher levels of integration.

Finally, the debriefing sessions are a way for the researcher to voice frustrations or feelings that could be blocking her from seeing the next steps in the research process. The debriefers help the researcher identify the next logical steps that support high standards of qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Without a doubt, the debriefers assisted me through listening, supporting, making suggestions, questioning decisions, and providing alternative ways to accomplish the goals of this research project.

Once I completed my research on each session, I wrote up my findings and the relevant theory and submitted this information to one or both of the debriefers along with copies of the original transcripts. On some transcripts, both debriefers completed detailed

reviews of my findings, on others, one debriefer took the primary role of debriefing and the other took a secondary role. Here is a schedule of the session assignments:

Table Four: Debriefing Assignments

| Both Debriefers         | Debriefer A Primary      | Debriefer B Primary    |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Week one, session six   | Week one, session two    | Week two, session nine |
| Week one, session ten   | Week four, session three | Week five, session ten |
| Week two, session six   |                          |                        |
| Week three, session six |                          |                        |
| Week four, session six  |                          |                        |
| Week five, session two  |                          |                        |

As I completed writing the interpretation for each session, I posted the interpretation and the associated transcript in the secure web space provided by the University of Texas. I sent the debriefers electronic “keys” so that they could open their assigned sessions. The debriefers would read the interpretation, compare it to the transcripts, and respond in writing. They e-mailed their responses to each other and me. Upon receipt, I carefully reviewed their comments and wrote responses to their feedback. Once they had reviewed my responses, we met in an internet chat room for further discussion of the work. The internet chats usually lasted from one to one-and-a-half hours. At the end of each chat, I saved and printed the chat script, incorporating any changes, insights, suggestions, etc. into my interpretations. I then rewrote the work at a higher level of synthesis for inclusion in this document.

### Consulting with Experts

I consulted with experts in SCT theory and practice as I developed insight into the group processes. It should be noted that my discussion with SCT experts included much more than discussions of theory. The SCT experts have been willing to share both their

personal accounts of their experiences in previous AIG groups and the behavioral and psychological changes that they feel they made as a result. We have speculated on the psychological processes that gave rise to these changes. I also tapped into the rich data that comes from the experts' many years of observations of group processes.

The SCTRl also supports discussion of theory through sponsoring a monthly telephone conference for interested individuals. One licensed SCT therapist, with extensive training in theory and application, leads the discussion. Near the end of the study, I regularly took advantage of these sessions to discuss my findings with these experts and others interested in SCT theory. The additional information gained through these “monthly drop-in study sessions” added great depth to my understanding of group processes.

In addition to this, I had numerous conversations with one licensed psychologist who is only vaguely familiar with SCT, but has many years of experience running groups using other models for intervention. I also ran a number of groups with this person, and our conversations often entailed comparing the SCT model to the models we used.

### My Experiential Training

In order to gain first hand knowledge of what it is like to be in an SCT experiential training group, I participated in one located in Austin, Texas for one semester. Although this was not an AIG (I do not have the training required to attend an AIG), the principles upon which the two group run are similar. Additionally, I attended at least two SCT weekend training groups in Austin. During these experiences, I gained a sense for many of the in-group processes and an orientation to how SCT-trained leaders conduct the groups, the theory supporting the practice, and the climate present in training groups. I also attended a weeklong SCT conference in Philadelphia, and was a member of groups

run by Yvonne Agazarian and Susan Gantt. Participation in these training contexts greatly increased my understanding of group theory and processes, and led to an appreciation of the complexity of group work.

### Computer Based Scoring of Transcripts

The Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software program, used to analyze the linguistic components in this study's data set, is a sophisticated analytical tool used to decipher the linguistic characteristics of written texts or transcripts of verbalizations (Pennebaker & King, 1999). Use of LIWC as an analytical tool is categorically different from looking at the thematic content of transcripts. Rather than analyzing for meaning, LIWC analyzes linguistic style (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). Tools such as LIWC are based upon the idea that *how* people use language contains psychological information, and this information is different the semantics of what is said (Pennebaker et al., 2003).

The LIWC program conducts sophisticated word count functions. The program has a dictionary consisting of thousands of commonly used words in up to 85 categories. These categories include both linguistic categories and categories that reflect psychological processes. Additionally, LIWC captures dimensions of time, space, and motion, and 19 personal concern categories. Creators of LIWC validated the program against judges' ratings, finding high correlations between the program and the judges' ratings. This indicates that LIWC can successfully identify linguistic characteristics. The LIWC program usually captures about 80 percent of the words people use in writing and speech (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996).



LIWC captures both the linguistic dimension of written material (the number of pronouns, articles, prepositions) and more general psychological constructs (emotion words, words indicating causality and social processes) (Pennebaker et al., 2003). Researchers in Pennebaker's laboratory have linked linguistic styles to other phenomena. For instance, relatively high usage of a combination of causal and insight words relates positively to physical and mental health (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Neuroticism is associated with increased use of negative emotion words and a negatively correlated with positive emotion words. Extraversion was associated with words indicating social processes. Linguistic style can also indicate state characteristics. For instance, anger is associated with a low use of qualifiers and a high use of references to others and negative emotion words (Pennebaker et al., 2003).

Studies have shown that the ways in which people talk or write tend to be consistent over time and settings (Pennebaker & King, 1999) (Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, J., & Price, 2001). But changes in linguistic style do occur (Pennebaker & Lay, 2002). For example, research has shown that as people age, there is a corresponding significant increase in "positive emotion words, fewer negative emotion words, fewer first person singular references, more future tense, and fewer past tense verbs. Age was also positively correlated with an increase in cognitive complexity (e.g., causation words, insight words, long words)" (Pennebaker et al., 2003). Shared trauma is associated with an increase in first person plural (we) and a decrease in first person singular (I, me, my) (Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003) and people tend to match one another's style when interacting in computer supported dyads (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002).

The subjects in the current study share a complicated language loaded with specific meanings. The language is so specific that Agazarian has created a glossary of terms to help members decipher her writings (Agazarian, 1997). Further, the SCT group context is highly structured. As mentioned previously, certain cognitive and language processes are

encouraged and others are discouraged. These characteristics may or may not be detectable in the LIWC analysis, and any linguistic variations across time will have to be interpreted with the SCT linguistic structure in mind.

I used previous research using the LIWC program to guide my variable selection process. The categories retained for study include the following:

- 1) words longer than six letters (Sixltr),
- 2) first person singular pronouns (I),
- 3) first person plural pronouns (We),
- 4) positive emotion words (Posemo),
- 5) negative emotion words (Negemo),
- 6) words indicating anxiety (Anxiety),
- 7) words indicating causal relationships (Cause),
- 8) words indicating insight (Insight),
- 9) words indicating social processes (Social), and
- 10) words indicating exclusionary processes or differentiation (Excl.)

Examples of the words contained in each category are included in the results section.

Finding no meaningful differences between men and women, I collapsed these categories. I then collapsed the sessions into the weeks, yielding two categories (leader or member) across five weeks. I charted and graphed the means for each variable across the five-week period and interpreted the variations across time in the results section of this document.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Three main areas for research emerged from the content analysis of the transcripts and the related theory. These three areas included comparing the expression of defensive behaviors across the life of the group to Agazarian's developmental model, an analysis of the types of observations members made and how they used this information, and an analysis of the ways in which intra-group competition affected members' perceptions and abilities to benefit from the experiential training context. Additionally, I conducted a linguistic analysis of the changes in language style over the life of the group.

In looking at the overall changes in the group over time, a pattern began to emerge that was somewhat similar to Agazarian's developmental model. Further analysis revealed that the members expressed many of the behaviors that characterize the subphases of development. The second section of this chapter details the similarities and differences between Agazarian's developmental model and the actual behaviors in the group. This section also contains a sequential overview of the different themes addressed by the group members.

Following the section on the developmental model and sequential overview, I present an analysis of the different ways in which members bring their moment-to-moment experiences and perceptions into the group. Agazarian (1997) promotes what she calls an 'observing system.' This refers to a set of skills that enables the group members to observe their experiences in the group in a specific way. The members developed and used these skills across the life of the group. An analysis this information yields insight into how members engage in meaningful exploration of the psychological processes that occur when differences in perceived power exist in a training context.

The next section of this chapter contains an analysis of member statements regarding the effects of competition in the group. I did not anticipate that this topic would emerge from the data. There is very little information in Agazarian's writings concerning the effects of competition, and although researchers have written extensively regarding competition in many contexts, I did not find evidence of empirical research on competition in the context of training groups. This study's data, however, reveals that competition deeply affects members' experiences in the group.

The last section of this chapter presents the results of the linguistic analysis using the LIWC program. This information provides yet another view of the changes that take place in the group across time.

Before launching into the results, I provide an explanation of the textual devices used in the results section to assist readers in making sense of the transcripts. Because the group process is complex, the language is specialized, and there are a great number of participants, the transcripts are quite difficult to understand. Spending a few minutes reviewing this section will ease the readers' burden considerably.

### Making Sense of the Transcripts

Any transcribed conversation is difficult to follow. This is especially so if the transcribed discourse occurs in a culture different from the reader's. As mentioned in the Methods Section, the SCT group is a unique culture. At the AIG level, the members share a set of unspoken assumptions, particular patterns of verbal interactions arising out of those assumptions, and a highly symbolic language. Cultural norms outside of SCT would likely reject many of the themes and group processes that are accepted and expected inside the SCT group. Members talk at length about their feelings without a great deal of

the self-editing that occurs according to the social norms active in our larger culture. For instance, members verbalize explicit sadistic fantasies about destroying the leader and explore specific sexual fantasies about other group members.

Members of the group, and therefore the readers of the transcripts, bear witness to painful and fascinating exploration of members' assumptions and projections. This information is often not available to the conscious mind of the member, much less other people. Making sense of these verbalizations can be extremely difficult. Adding to the difficulty of interpreting the transcripts is the fact that we will not be witnessing a dialogue between two people. The transcripts are a record of dialogue between 24 people – the two leaders and up to 22 members. Further, we cannot tell which members are speaking. This means that we cannot tell if the same speakers are making comments in a back-and-forth manner, or if many members are interacting around the same subject.

### Textual Devices

I use some specific textual devices to assist the reader in unpacking the transcripts. Perhaps the most important of these came out of suggestions from Drs. Stephanie Rude and Diane Schallert. When a term is used that has specific meaning within the SCT culture, I underline the term and provide a definition or explanation in the footnotes. I only provide the definition the first time the term is encountered in the transcripts, but I continue to underline the terms throughout all quotes. I also provide a glossary at the end of this document.

An explanation of the quoted material usually precedes it, although further explanations may follow it. Any quote can contain two types of information: (1) the specific verbalization to which I am pointing and, (2) material that helps the reader put the quote

in context. When contextual material is included in a quote, I italicize the specific information upon which I wish the reader to focus. I use ellipses to indicate when I have trimmed extraneous material from a quote. "...snip" is used to indicate non-sequential quotations.

I also track comments by whether the person speaking is one of the leaders or a member. "L(Y)" for the leader, Yvonne, and "L(S)" for the leader, Susan, indicates comments by leaders. "M" indicates comments by men and is the reference used to replace men's names in the quotations. Likewise, "F" indicates comments by women and women's names. "Ms" is used to indicate when multiple members are speaking simultaneously. All transcript quotes are indented. My hope is that these textual devices will make the reader's task easier as we move through the next three subsections of results: the developmental nature of the group, the observing system, and intra-group competition.

### Session Themes and the Phases of Development

The themes addressed by members in this group changed from session to session. In this section, I give the reader an overview of the sequence of themes in the group. Because the work of any one session depends upon the work accomplished in previous sessions (Agazarian, 1997), it is helpful to understand the changes that occur in the order in which they occur. In this section, I also compare this sequence to Agazarian's (1997) theoretical model of group development, illustrating the similarities and differences. This overview and comparison gives the reader a sense for how the group dynamics evolve over the life of the group.

Review of Agazarian’s Phases of Development

Below, I present the theorized phases of development in chart form. This is a modification of a chart presented by Agazarian (1997) in her book entitled Systems-Centered Therapy for Groups (pp. 94-95), which I used as a reference point when investigating whether the group’s actual behaviors matched the model.

Table Five: Agazarian’s Model of Group Development – Abbreviated Version

| Phase               | Subphase               | Characteristic Behaviors  |
|---------------------|------------------------|---|
| Authority           | Flight                 | Stereotypical social defenses, i.e., role behaviors, anxiety, and tension   |
|                     | Transition to Fight    | Masochistic depression or sadistic hostility  |
|                     | Fight                  | Enacting superior/inferior role relationships   |
|                     | Transition to Intimacy | Stubborn resistance to change, role relationships   |
| Intimacy            | Enchantment            | Idealization, enchantment, or fusion fantasies  |
|                     | Disenchantment         | Mistrust of self or others, alienation, and despair   |
| Interdependent Work |                        | Defenses against knowledge, e.g. loss of ability to make a decision or implement change<br><br>Defenses against common sense, e.g., being self-centered and not contributing to the attainment of group goals |

On the next few pages, I present in chart form an overview of each session. I summarize the themes in each session and relate these themes to Agazarian’s developmental model. I also briefly describe the leaders’ behaviors in each session.

Table Six: Overview of Session Themes

| <b>Week &amp; Session / Phase &amp; Subphase</b>   | <b>Leader Role</b>                                 | <b>Themes Expressed in Session</b>   | <b>How themes relate to developmental model</b>   |
|--|--|--|---|
| Week One, Session Two, Authority Phase/Flight Subphase                                       | Leader Silent                                      | Member concerned about safety. They experience anxiety around norms, goals, boundaries. Some express sleepiness and urge to self-soothe. Some voice some fear of being judged by the leaders. Members are irritated with peers who are disrupting the group by violating boundaries. | These experienced SCT members violate established norms and then spend time re-creating them. Members use concerns for safety, norm building, etc. a way of expressing the anxiety and tension characteristic of the flight subphase. |
| Week One, Session Six (1 <sup>st</sup> half) Authority Phase/Flight Subphase                 | Leader makes provocative and irritating statements | Members were unable to subgroup and were feeling quite frustrated by this. Feeling skeptical of self, somatic defenses, feeling blocked. The members become very irritated with the leader.  | Being caught up in safety concerns can be interpreted as a flight away from directly dealing with the authority issue. These feelings of flight escalated into feeling dizzy and blocked – typical flight reactions                   |
| Week One Session Six (2 <sup>nd</sup> half) Authority Phase/ Transition from Fight to Flight | Leader makes provocative statements                | Sadistic hostility toward the leader – hesitantly at first. Then members articulate full-blown sadistic fantasies. The members perceive the leader as shaming.   | The sadism expressed toward the leader is consistent with the behaviors that characterize the transition from flight to fight   |
| Week One, Session Ten (1st half) Authority Phase/ Transition to Intimacy                     | Leader pushes members to process at deeper level   | The members enact behaviors that are stereotypical for less developed SCT groups. The members become helpless, not understanding what the leader wants.  | The member helplessness and lack of understanding can be interpreted as a stubborn resistance to change   |



| <b>Week &amp; Session / Phase &amp; Subphase</b>   | <b>Leader Role</b>  | <b>Themes Expressed in Session</b>   | <b>How themes relate to developmental model</b>   |
|--|---|--|---|
| Week One<br>Session Ten<br>(2 <sup>nd</sup> half)<br><br>Intimacy<br>Phase/<br>Enchantment<br>Subphase | The leader is largely silent, using gentle humor to guide the group                           | Members process the metaphor of soft-bodied seals lying on a beach. They express humor and there is a relaxed feeling in the group.  | Members use metaphor to express feelings of intimacy and sensuality, consistent with the enchantment subphase,  |
| Week Two,<br>Session Three<br><br>Authority<br>Phase/Flight<br>Subphase                                | The leader uses humor to re-consolidate the group   | Members reject domination by any single member. They express anger toward one member. Members want Yvonne only as a resource while members take ownership of the group. Disintegrating energy expressed with the frustration of not being able to subgroup. Members investigate what interferes with staying in member role as a way of solving the subgrouping dilemma. | The members avoid working with each other in subgroups – they are still <u>talking about</u> rather than doing. Members may be talking about how they think they should feel, rather than acting on task. Members vacillate between flight behavior of avoidance and irritated fight behaviors. |
| Week Two<br>Session Six<br><br>Authority<br>Phase/<br>Fight Sub-<br>phase                              | Leader active with individuals on barrier experiences. She points out costs of avoiding pain. | The group explores barrier experiences, seeing how they re-enact old roles in the context of the group. They begin to differentiate between person and member role through enacting person role and being corrected by the leader.   | The enactment and exploration of barrier experiences is an example of enacting an inferior role relationship. Members are vacillating between acting out fight phase and exploring it.  |

| <b>Week &amp; Session / Phase &amp; Subphase</b>                                       | <b>Leader Role</b>   | <b>Themes Expressed in Session</b>   | <b>How themes relate to developmental model</b>   |
|--|--|--|---|
| Week Two<br>Session Nine<br><br>Authority<br>Phase/<br>Fight Sub-<br>phase             | Leader is extremely active with individuals, making very few GAW <sup>1</sup> comments. First instruction on observing system. | The members engage in taking back projections, but in a stereotypical manner. The group explores peer role-locks. They identify ways in which they attempt to manipulate one another into taking up complementary roles.               | The enactment of roles and their exploration is an example of stereotypical role processing, part of the fight stage. In this session, the members go back and forth between being in a role and observing it.  |
| Week Three<br>Session Two<br><br>Working<br>Session                                    | The leader was very active in the session, asking pointed questions of the members   | Members explore various group dynamics and are able to link their somatic experiences to the group. They also begin to process their feelings about competition in the group. Members state the kind of feedback they want from peers. | The members seem more mindful of their member roles and less likely to call attention to their personal issues. The level of acting out is reduced; group dynamics, competition, and impulses to act out are discussed. This is a working section, not fitting neatly into the developmental model. |
| Week Three<br>Session Six<br><br>Intimacy<br>Phase/<br>Disenchant-<br>ment<br>Subphase | Leader focuses on specific language about sex. She strongly encourages members to be specific.                                 | Men process castration anxiety and sexual attraction to female body parts. Women talk about being attracted to men. The discussion shifts to trusting others and then trusting the self.   | The castration anxiety can be interpreted as alienation; the men's attraction to female body part can be interpreted as a defense against feelings of despair. The women seemed to feel alienated from themselves through behaviors consistent with disenchantment.                                 |

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<sup>1</sup> GAW = group-as-a-whole

| <b>Week &amp; Session / Phase &amp; Subphase</b>                          | <b>Leader Role</b>   | <b>Themes Expressed in Session</b>   | <b>How themes relate to developmental model</b>  |
|---|--|--|--|
| Week Four<br>Session Two<br>(Intimacy Phase/<br>Disenchantment Sub-phase) | Leader works directly with individuals in the group.                                       | Members identify paranoid projections upon other members   | The paranoid fantasies are further evidence of the disenchantment members are feeling. Session ends before resolution is found.  |
| Week Four<br>Session Six<br><br>Working Session                           | Leader is less active in this session, She nurtures and challenges members.                | Members process their fear of being damaged by negative feedback from peers, especially in light of the possibility of establishing a licensing group. Group is using leader as model for giving feedback. | Although the fear could be interpreted as part of the disenchantment subphase, the work was so specific to feedback that it is more accurately interpreted as a working session around the licensing group.                        |
| Week Four<br>Session Nine<br><br>Authority Phase/<br>Fight Sub-phase      | The leader makes assertions about member motivations. She labels and interprets behaviors. | The members explore how they benefit from keeping the leader in a role-lock with one member. That member explores his role as victim in relation to the leader.  | The work done in the session is so explicit to the role relationship that it might better be categorized as simply a working session. The members were acting out and exploring their roles, also consistent with the fight stage. |
| Week Five<br>Session Two<br><br>Working Session                           | Leader is relatively silent, though she directly instructs the group on leadership skills  | Members process their fears around competition. They relate previous group events to leadership issues.  | Members cooperatively work with one another.   |

| <b>Week &amp; Session / Phase &amp; Subphase</b>         | <b>Leader Role</b>  | <b>Themes Expressed in Session</b>   | <b>How themes relate to developmental model</b>   |
|--|---|--|---|
| Week Five<br>Session Ten<br>Interdependent<br>Work Phase | Leader is more silent.<br>She supports group work with occasional comments. | Members choose a peer-leader through a democratic process and then subgroup together around whether to establish a licensing group | The group is able to process briefly information in the group without the direction of the designated leader, Yvonne. They work in an interdependent, cooperative manner. |

Below is a more detailed description of each session. Quotations from the transcripts are provided to illustrate the type of work done in each session. The first paragraph of each week gives a brief synopsis of the work accomplished in the transcribed sessions across the week. Then details of each session are presented.

Week One: May 2001, Sessions Two, Six, and Ten

During this week, the group proceeds quickly through the flight, transition to fight, and enchantment subphases. The transcribed sessions from this week did not contain evidence that the group spent time in the fight subphase. Relatively speaking, this is extremely fast-paced development. Members come back to the fight subphase in subsequent sessions, and remain in this phase of development while they build and use their observation skills. At the beginning of the group, however, the members wrestle with their fears and norm building.

## Session Two: The Flight Subphase

It is a widely held tenet of group dynamics that members will increase feelings of safety through establishing norms, goals, and boundaries soon after a group convenes. The early work in this week shows members becoming aware of their fears and misgivings and working together to establish group norms. This first section shows how the members, using a scuba-diving metaphor (going deeper, having a guide), first explicate their safety concerns:

### Safety concerns

F: And I want to, I don't know if this is going to sound like, not a join<sup>2</sup>. In the present, the level that we are at right now, feels OK. *And, I am cautious about going deeper, going deeper too fast.* (May 2001, session two, line 20)

...snip

M: *I can join you, Fem-name, on, on uh the caution about where you go, and the pace about not going there until you are ready.* What what I am aware of is not the need from guide masters, so much, as the need for everyone to be on board. (May 2001, session two, line 27)

...snip

F: It's sort of like, *the leaders aren't going to actively have our backs*, so are we? And it's just sort of like, I want to be sure, who I am feeling like I can really go there with and who I can't. (May 2001, session two, line 68)

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<sup>2</sup>A join occurs when a member establishes an empathetic connection, based upon a shared experience, with other members in the group. In this instance, "not a join" indicates that this member is not sure her feelings are similar enough to establish an empathetic connection.

In the above quotes, members state their lack of confidence (fear of going too fast) and distrust of the leaders. They are seeking to identify the members in the group they trust in anticipation of processing “deep” issues, e.g., revealing member vulnerabilities.

### Setting Goals

Members then attempt to address group goals by revealing their motivations for attending the Authority Issues Group:

M: I would like to bring in my experience right now. Aahh. *I have a deep want for this group to help me get this authority piece*<sup>3</sup>. That I have gotten. I have a tingle in my face and I’ve got some tears and I can feel my heart. I really want to get this piece. (May 2001, session two, line 109)

...snip

F: I can join. That’s what I am here for. That’s why I am here. To get this authority piece. (May 2001, session two, lines 111-112)

Members declare that “getting the authority piece” is the goal. For now, however, members continue their work on boundary, goal, and norm setting.

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<sup>3</sup> Member is referring to the authority issue, e.g., addressing the psychological needs, habits of thinking, and emotional responses that influence how humans (1) externalize power,(2) establish relationships based upon differences in power, and(3) internalize a sense of personal authority.

## Boundaries

In the quote below, they attempt to establish time and/or space boundaries for both the group-as-a-whole and subgroups. The following quotes provide evidence that this group not only struggles with setting boundaries, but also encounters considerable frustration when members violate them:

M: I want to join on some irritation and a want also. And I want to, people to stay in the room physically and I want people to be here on time. ... I want to be able to count on people to take care of their bodies and NOT leave, you know, barring an emergency, and to be here on time, barring an emergency.

F: I want them to undo their defenses<sup>4</sup> so they can meet me in their eyes and subgroup<sup>5</sup> and stay. It's not just coming and going around the room. It's (inaudible) in the subgroup. (May 2001, session two, lines 203-204)

The work done in this session is clearly in keeping with the theoretical model that states the early sessions of a group are spent in establishing norms, goals, and boundaries. One important effect of members addressing safety through establishing these norms,

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<sup>4</sup> A defense is a set of assumptions, enacted through relationships or social behaviors, used to maintain familiar perceptions of reality. People use defenses to reduce anxiety or avoid expected pain. Undoing a defense refers to the process of recognizing a defense, finding out why the person is using it, identifying the costs and benefits of enacting it, and finding alternative ways of thinking and acting.

<sup>5</sup> Subgroup refers to a group within the group-as-a-whole, established through a similarity of feelings, maintained through eye contact, and deepened through identifying and verbalizing greater and greater detail about the shared experience. Subgrouping, the verb, refers to enacting all of the behaviors required to establish and maintain a subgroup.

however, is that they avoid directly talking about their feelings of anxiety. This avoidance is commonly referred to as “flight” away from participation in the group and flight behaviors are characteristic of Agazarian’s first subphase of group development.

### Session Six: The Transition between Flight and Fight

The avoidance of anxiety continues in session six of May 2001 as members experience failures in maintaining reliable affective bonds (subgrouping).

#### Skepticism

During the first part of session six, members avoid emotion through skepticism:

M: The experience is, uh, is, uh, I feel skeptical. I feel wary of myself, of the group, of my ability to observe or to be aware of what is going on.  
(May 2001, session six, line 104)

Skepticism, in this instance, is a doubt of everything in this member’s experience – of himself, the group, and his perceptions. The idea of not being able to trust the self creates considerable somatic tension in many members. They react with confusion and disorientation. A number of them report feeling blocked or dizzy. These are the somatic defenses associated with flight (Agazarian, 1997):



## The Somatic Defenses

M: I am uh, I feel a little dizzy, a light headed, um, I feel a little tranced. I don't know if I want a subgroup to work in. I feel connected to you almost like a pair<sup>6</sup>. And I, yeah. (May 2001, session six, line 106)

...snip

M: Yeah. I feel some of that too. And the heat and tension returned to my neck and shoulders. And uh just sort of, like there is something over my ears.

M: I feel blocked in a strange sort of way. Blocked so I can't hear.

M: Right, I can feel, it's like my balance is off. (May 2001, session six, lines 115-117)

Up until now, all the group behaviors are consistent with the flight defense described by Agazarian (1997) and other group theoreticians. A bit later in this session, the group enters the transition subphase between flight and fight.

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<sup>6</sup> Pairing within a group is a type of defensive behavior. It occurs when two people engage in mutually reinforcing and stereotypical social roles. The roles tend to heighten the importance of the relationship above other relationships, and the goal of maintaining the paired relationship supersedes group goals.

### Transition between Flight and Fight – Sadistic Fantasies

Theory holds that during the transition between flight and fight, members will express either masochistic depression or sadistic targeting of the leader (Agazarian, 1997). This group opts for the sadistic targeting of the leader:

M: And mine [level of energy] went up, I wanted to kill her [the leader]. I want to kill her. Just kill her. I want her to shut up. (May 2001, session six, line 310)

...snip

F: Stomp on her face.

M: Rip her tongue out. (May 2001, session six, lines 313-314)

...snip

M: I want to look in her eyes while she cries, and suffers, whimpers. And I want to make contact and see her hurt. (May 2001, session six, line 332)

...snip

F: I want to put my fingers in her mouth and stretch it open until it breaks.

M: I want to make her hurt for everything I have ever hurt for. Every ounce of pain I have ever felt. See it in her face and her eyes. See fear in her eyes. (May 2001, session six, lines 335-336)

The leader encourages members to explore their sadism and group quickly passes through this phase. The developmental model states that the next phase for the group is the fight phase. The transcribed data do not clearly display this phase of development until session six of November 2001; one could assume the group preliminarily works through this stage in one or more of the sessions in the week of May 2001 that was not transcribed.

## Session Ten: Transition to Intimacy and Enchantment

In session ten of May 2001, the leader takes a more active role, and she pushes the members to take their work to a deeper level. Up to this point, the members have been forming subgroups around physical sensations, hostility, and rage. The leader encourages members to look deeper into the motivations and emotions that result in these feelings.

### Resistance to Change

A stubborn resistance against doing work characterizes this transitional phase between fight and flight and the members display behaviors consistent with the model in this session. The resistance appears as a tug-of-war between the members and the leader. She wants the group to go deeper and the members seem unable to understand what she is asking of them:

F: I want to kick you in the chest.

L(Y): What is your experience (inaudible) me?

F: I have it in my foot and I want to let it go...

L(Y): What is your experience?

F: I'm very angry.

F: I have an enormous burning in my torso...

L(Y): Group, we can all do bodies<sup>7</sup>. What do you experience that's fueling that inside you? (May 2001, session ten, lines 23-29)

...snip

F: I want to learn, I want to learn more about what M's talking about.

L(Y): That's a thought<sup>8</sup>.

F: I want my experience right now.

L(Y): Where is it?

F: It's in my belly, it's, it's...

L(Y): What, what do you (inaudible) body for?

F: I'm learning from my body. (May 2001, session ten, lines 167-173)

...snip

L(Y): It's not your insides.

F: I was trying to join M.

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<sup>7</sup> "Doing bodies" refers to an SCT process wherein a person increases his or her awareness of physical or apprehensive reactions. This allows the person to access more readily his or her gut reactions and emotions before they are modified or distorted by social conventions, belief systems, or training. Members then bring this information into a subgroup through a join, which allows the person to develop a highly nuanced understanding of his or her spontaneous reactions.

<sup>8</sup> A thought, or thinking, used in this context refers to the defense of intellectualization or evading the work in the group or one's own emotions by retreating into non-productive thinking. This process diverts the member's attention away from the here-and-now process in the group.

L(Y): Don't try, do it. (May 2001, session ten, lines 175-177)

This tug-of-war continues for quite a while. Instead of working to achieve the type of awareness the leader is promoting, the groups starts a rapid slide into a strong sense of intimacy among group members. This behavior is in keeping with phase two of the developmental model, the phase of intimacy.

### Enchantment Subphase

The group enters the enchantment subphase, expressing fantasies of merging and rejecting differences between peers. The group uses the metaphor of the warm, soft bodies of seals lying close together on a beach to express the closeness they feel:

F: I feel so much affection. I'm feeling touched, touched on my face  
(inaudible) I feel like I just (inaudible).

F: I feel like M just pulled me into the mud.

F: I'm rolling around in my, the join, and feeling the mud and people sliding and the sensuousness of it and the pleasure and just rolling and feeling the touch. I am feeling that right now. (May 2001, session ten, lines 314-316)

The group continues to work with images of intimacy. This work culminates when a member expresses a fusion fantasy with the leader of the group. The leader dispels some of the trance-like enchantment when she uses humor in responding the member:

F: All right, I'm fal... [falling], I'm going to do it. I'm going to, I'm going to give my authority to Yvonne.

L(Y): Not a bad thing to do.

M's: (laughter) (lots of voices, inaudible) (May 2001, session ten, lines 379-381)

The session ends with the members longing for even more intimacy. It is interesting to note that this group moved relatively quickly through the various subphases contained within the Authority Phase and actually entered the Intimacy Phase within the first week. This quick movement may have been enabled by the extremely high level of skill these members have in overcoming the various defensive behaviors that characterize the phases of development. The group returns, however, to explore extensively those behaviors that are the hallmark of the Authority Phase of development in Agazarian's model. This is consistent with the overall goal of the group – to work through the defensive behaviors that humans enact when differences in power are perceived to exist. They begin this work the following November, when the group reconvenes.

#### Week Two: November 2001, Sessions Three, Six, and Nine

Six months pass between the last week's sessions and the November 2001 session, and significant changes in membership occur this week. Two members from the last session do not return this week, and eight members, who attended the first week but not the second, rejoin the group. The transcripts revealed that during session three, the members briefly enact the norming process as the group assimilated the new or returning members.

In the remaining two sessions, the leader is quite active. She works intensely with various members as they become aware of their habitual defensive behaviors.

### Session Three: Revisiting the Norming Process

It is not surprising, given the new combination of members, that the group briefly revisits norm building. The members state that they want a new norm in their relationship with the leader; they want her as a resource rather than a focus in the group. Unlike the rejection of the leader in the first week, members express these desires not as a rebellion against the leader as much as a desire for members to take responsibility for the group:

F: I, want to join our group, and this feels very scary to say to that now, the group that we create, not with the lies and bullshit all the time. I want the group that we're going, we are making without Yvonne constantly intervening to, to put us back on track. I want to start making our group and I want my voice to be part, I want everyone's voice to be part of our group and I'm... (November 2001, session three, line 180)

...snip

F: I, I want our group to know, to figure out how to use her (Yvonne) as resource<sup>9</sup> and not make her our, our leader right now. So that we use the information as resource but we also use our own inner self and our resource that we all bring, that we've been giving up to her. That's what I feel and I don't know how to do that distinction. I, I, it's, I think it's going to be in the group and I want us to start finding that in our self. I want to find, I want to trust each of us to find it in each of us. (November 2001, session three, lines 189)

This is an important shift in the group's sense of itself. Members are beginning to see each other and the leader as resources for information and knowledge. With this recognition is the idea that they can determine their own development.

#### Bringing data into the group

For the first time in the transcripts, members deliberately bring specific information into the group to solve problems. For example, members provide evidence that the group can be a safe, non-judgmental environment:

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<sup>9</sup>Resource refers to the idea that each member and the leader hold information that is important to the group if it is to accomplish its task.



M: (inaudible) the context that I mentioned 30 minutes ago, yesterday I felt M undo his cognitive distortion<sup>10 11</sup> and his (inaudible) and made (inaudible) which the *group helped me with. They did not annihilate me or ridicule me or run me off. So I have some data that it is possible to be in a member system*<sup>12</sup> and make mistakes and be supported. (November 2001, session three, line 240)

...snip

M: Does anybody else have data<sup>13</sup>? (November 2001, session three, line 242)

...snip

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<sup>10</sup> A cognitive distortion is a type of defense; the way that the member perceives or interprets events is distorted by the assumptions he or she makes.

<sup>11</sup> Undoing a defense refers to the process of recognizing a defense, finding out why the person is using it, identifying the costs and benefits of enacting it, and finding alternative ways of thinking and acting.

<sup>12</sup> The member system occurs when a person in a group is able to maintain a metacognitive awareness of his or her internal state while attending to the work of the group or subgroup.

<sup>13</sup> Data refers to information held by individuals in a group that, if verbalized in the group context, can further the work of the group in accomplishing the stated task.

F: My, my data is, of work, prior work this morning, uh, when I was in depression<sup>14</sup> and being the victim<sup>15</sup> and you were able to do undo it with help. *It was a group experience not a, “what’s wrong with Fem-name experience”* but I’m really happy that I didn’t take it that way and that really (inaudible) felt (inaudible) was essential. (November 2001, session three, line 247)

Group members have found that they can be vulnerable – and even make mistakes – and other members will support them. The work cited above is a beautiful example of the group members working together to find out what the group has done in the past that might make it easier to do work in the future. These recounts of supportive work are also a norming process; members encourage this type of positive support. By implication, the opposite – criticism, impatience, and judgment – are being discouraged in the group.

### Session Six: The Fight Stage Emerges and Member Explore Barrier Experiences

In session six of November 2001, members move away from this new kind of norming process and wrestle with barrier experiences. Barrier experiences, along with projective identification and stereotypical roles, are defenses against authority (see literature review) (Agazarian, 1997). These defenses characterize the fight stage in the developmental model (Agazarian, 1997). Members gain awareness of how much they hate being challenged by others. They also learn a great deal about tolerating frustration.

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<sup>14</sup> Depression is viewed as a defense by which the member expends energy in thinking about or criticizing him or her self rather than making contributions to the group.

<sup>15</sup> The victim role is a stereotypical social defense, usually expressed in the early stages of group development. The person in victim role assumes a helpless and wounded attitude that prevents him or her from accepting responsibility for circumstances, behaviors, and events.

## Barrier Experiences and Rejection of Present Reality

A barrier experience is said to occur when a person assumes a certain intra-psyche stance based upon previous experiences. This stance overrides current information; a person in a barrier experience will ignore or deny any information that conflict with his or her assumptions (Agazarian, 1997). The quotation below is a prototypical example of a barrier experience:

F: I, uhh, in this context, I hit and run, and (pause) I come quick and leave. Umm, it's comes from a place—if I stick around, I'm going to be criticized or ignored, so I'll just come in quickly and then I'll go and get out of the way. So I either disappear and come in and vigilantly watch, anticipating and projecting that I know that I'm going to be criticized, or ignored, so even with the forcefield<sup>16</sup>, I'll get them in quick and sloppy, so they can't be seen and they can't be thought about.

L(Y): Is that the feedback you got?

F: No, but I don't believe the feedback that I got.

M's: (Laughter) (November 2001, session six, lines 300-303)

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<sup>16</sup> Forcefield is a written document generated by members or by the group that outlines the reasons why a person might and might not want to accomplish a task. Driving forces are those that motivate a person to accomplish a goal and restraining forces are those that motivate a person not to put their energy into accomplishing the task. Theory holds that decreasing the restraining forces is more effective in promoting task accomplishment than increasing the driving forces (Agazarian, 1997).

When members reject current information like this, they have difficulty grasping here-and-now dynamics, fully participating and benefiting from a group experience becomes difficult. This is just one example of a number of barrier experiences explored during this session.

### Session Nine: The Fight Stage Continues through Role Locks

In session nine of November 2001, members spend a great deal of time exploring how role-locks affect members as they develop leadership skills. Role-locks occur when two or more people assume complementary social roles, each person stimulating the other(s) to behave according to a stereotypical stance. They act out differences in power – often a one-up/one-down relationship of doctor/patient, teacher/student, or leader/follower. In order for role-locks to work, the person in the one-down position gives to someone else the ability and responsibility for his or her change, growth, or behavior (Agazarian, 1997). Members in the one-down position also often assume that others can hurt him or her because they have little control over their situations. In the next quote, a member exemplifies the one-down mindset:

M: That very thing. That's what keeps me from like, scared to death, that that's what going to happen when I put myself out there, when I really expose myself that that's exactly what's going to happen to me.

L: You're going to be challenged.

M: [inaudible] What?

L: You're going to be challenged...

M: Yes.

L: to find out who you are, yes.

M: My bit is that I won't be accepted for who I am. (November 2001, session nine, lines 149-155)

...snip

L: And it's important to find out, which you've already managed to feel so that it's no problem anymore because you've done the work there. ... *and you can't take the group through the authority issue<sup>17</sup> without learning how to do that over and over and over again.* And what's more, *group members will take you to the authority issue to get you where it really hurts because the work is here, because the group is always training you to be the authority it needs to have in order to be able to work its authority issue.* (November 2001, session nine, line 158)

Here the leader seems to be pointing out that a group will invariably take any leader to his or her vulnerable places because that is where the group can best work through its concerns about being dependent upon an imperfect leader.

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<sup>17</sup> Taking the group through the authority issue refers to the idea that every group goes through the phases of development. Part of the development is a process wherein members have to deal with other peoples' hatred of authority, feelings of dependency, and fear of dependence upon an imperfect leader. When going through the authority issue, members often target the group leader with anger, hostility, and sadistic fantasies. An untrained leader is likely to respond to the members' hostility, criticism, and rage with feelings of defensiveness. A competent group leader must be able to understand and respond in a way that enables the group to work through this phase of development without damaging the mental and emotional health of the leader or the members.

### The Hatred Response

A great deal of the difficulty members have with dependency on authorities may be because they know on some level that the leader is imperfect. These imperfections might lead the leader to knowingly or unknowingly damage the member. From the leader's perspective, the difficulty may arise from having his or her imperfections revealed. In groups, both leaders and members regularly experience having their imperfections uncovered. The member below voices a common response to this dynamic:

M: I'm getting very clear on how much hatred I have for that person that calls me on it [his imperfections.]

L: Yes! Of course! (November 2001, session nine, lines 193-194)

Unmasking and resolving the hatred-response is essential for a person who desires to lead this type of group. If the hatred remains unresolved and the person takes up the role of leader in a group, an extremely harmful dynamic may occur in which the leader punishes members for unveiling the leader's imperfections.

### Tolerating Frustration

The members of this group repeatedly experience frustration as they dismantle their defenses. Learning how to tolerate and work in spite of this frustration is a major task for members. In the quote below, the leader seems to be indicating that even the feelings of frustration and hatred are defenses against learning. She consistently redirects the energy in the group into the present, placing responsibility on each individual for his or her development:

L: No. So again, we're asking the same question. *Do you know what work you would do if you didn't go down this road?* (long pause) For example, if you didn't hate me. Do you know what your relationship with me would be? [inaudible] your relationship with me. (long pause) [inaudible] in a transferred state<sup>18</sup>. Just do your work inside (inaudible). So would you try moving your transference aside, just push, and see what happens or if anything happens after you move it aside. But literally do that. Put that person [inaudible] behind your palm and just push it out of the way. Just briefly for a moment. (November 2001, session nine, line 231)

...snip

M: (long pause) There's some sense that I would know me better, I'm not sure ... (November 2001, session nine, line 236)

This member is able to recognize that he would learn more about himself if he could simply let go of the hatred he feels. Tolerating frustration and learning to determine one's own behavior outside of role locks is a theme that members address throughout much of this group. One of the overriding goals of this training is to address these very issues so that members can eventually gain freedom from roles. This would allow them to respond appropriately to the demands of their current context – wherever that might be.

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<sup>18</sup> A member is in "transferred state" when he or she responds to his or her environment according to assumptions rather than the current context.

### Week Three: April 2002, Sessions Two and Six

At this point in the life of the Authority Issues Group, membership has stabilized. The group makes a significant shift in this week's work: they more often look analytically at in-group behavior as data to be used in the group's evolution. Additionally, the issue of power in the group becomes more salient, and group members begin taking up the role of peer-leader. The members begin a vacillation in their behavior this week – sometimes they are able to work consciously on the member level, performing extremely sophisticated explorations of group dynamics. At other times, they seem to fall back into enacting defensive behaviors that are described in Agazarian's developmental model. It is difficult to describe and label the differences, so examples are provided that will illustrate the changes.

#### Session Two: Members Practice Bringing Data into the Group

Session two starts with the members again discussing a norm in the group. Notice how members are bringing in their experiences as data about the issue.



F: And, and, my piece with that, I want to spell out the distraction<sup>19</sup> piece because, my piece that hasn't sat right is, having a person that's distracted choose a person to undo the distraction<sup>20</sup>. Consistently there's a grab in my stomach. Number one you don't know the person, who they choose, if they're there yet [ready to help undo the distraction] and it is an avoidance of competition that we do it that way.

F: Well, and the other piece for me is, there's a, suspicion even, that plays into some potential, like pairing-ish potential, things in the group. And I'm not sure about that, I'm just, I know that that's a little of my discomfort is that there's something for me up in people picking their own undoer not being about the *group's* ownership of the process, but about potentially the person's system<sup>21</sup>, uh, I don't know, maybe. (April 2002, session two, lines 1-2)

The members are linking their feelings and somatic experiences to group. They appear less person-centered and more mindful of being a contributing member in the group. They also explore how the different types of relationships between members. A number of members identify competition as being very influential in the group. I address this issue in a later section of this chapter.

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<sup>19</sup> A distraction is said to exist when something is keeping a member from having full attention and awareness in the group.

<sup>20</sup> Undoing a distraction, or performing a distraction exercise, is a process involving two members or a member and a leader. The person helping a distracted member assists that member in resolving the distraction so he or she can be attentive to group processes. SCT theory provides a specific method for undoing distractions.

<sup>21</sup> A person system occurs when a person is aware of his or her feelings, but is not acting for the benefit of a group or subgroup. A person acting out of a person system is often engaged in defensive behaviors.

## Session Six: Disenchantment and Anxiety

In session six, the group displays behaviors consistent with the second part of the Intimacy Phase. Disenchantment, mistrust, and alienation are the characteristic traits of this phase. Initially, the men in the current session spend a great deal of time exploring mistrust in the form of castration anxiety. While engaged in this exploration, the leader is quite active. She urges the members to be very explicit.

M: Yet it, the other bit is the feeling it's so difficult to express. It's as if I lost, lost me member.

F: Lost your member?

M: My member, my penis. (April 2002, session six, lines 59-61)

...snip

M: In talk about, M mentioned losing a member, uh, it's real strong like, somebody, somebody's going to do that to me, somebody is going to come along and cut it off. (April 2002, session six, line 57)

As this exploration continues, the group starts relating how their fears keep them from fully engaging in the group process. They soon express longing for safety and intimacy. Some of the men express this as a longing for the female breast:

M: I can join you about the longing for the breasts and just the breasts, not, not the person but I want the comfort and the cuddling. I want the breasts. And just the love and wanting of that and (inaudible.) (April 2002, session six, line 108)

Members spend the remainder of the session vacillating between describing the ways in which they are sexually attracted to one another and exploring their fears regarding being in relationships with others. There is no evidence in the transcript from week six that the disenchantment is resolved.

Unfortunately, session ten, the next transcribed session, was of poor quality and we do not have the data for the remaining session. We do know that the group reconvenes the following November, and the work continues then.

#### Week Four: November 2002, Sessions Three, Six, and Nine

At the beginning of the April 2002 session, we saw a subtle shift in functioning as members increase the instances where they observe individuals' behaviors and use this information as data. Members further develop these skills in the November 2002. The transcripts show that in session two of this week, the members share the paranoid fantasies they have about one another and the leader continues working directly with individuals in the group. The paranoia is evidence that the disenchantment begun in the last week (with castration anxiety) continues this week. In session six, members go on to reveal that they are particularly worried about receiving negative feedback from their peers. The leader provides a nurturing environment while still challenging the members to explore these issues. In session nine, they explore the consequences of keeping the leader in a role-lock with one member, and that member discovers some of the ways in which he supports the lock.

## Session Two: Disenchantment Subphase Continues through Paranoid Fantasies

In session two of November 2002, an extremely short session, members explore specific paranoid fantasies active in the group. These paranoid fantasies seem related to an underlying theme: giving and receiving peer feedback. For the time being, however, members get their paranoid fantasies out in the open. The issue of feedback becomes more salient in session six.

F: I feel it, too. I feel it with Fem-name. I feel like when she is quiet she is judging me. "I would never be a victim like you." When she goes one-up. When I am working.

F: Yeah, I feel like she's one-up and she's quiet and she just looks at me and sees what a terrible job I am doing. And is very happy to sort of indicate that, anytime.

F: Who does it? Who? Who?

F: Fem-name.

F: I am so relieved to hear other people, people in here have people that they feel paranoid about besides me. Doesn't matter that it's not the same person. It's just a relief. (November 2002, session three, lines 11-15)

Members find comfort in the fact that many in the group experience paranoid anxiety, but the session ends before members find a resolution for their fears.

## Session Six: Work Specific to Exploring Fear of Feedback

During session six, members explore what kind of feedback they desire from one another. In this early stage of peer-to-peer feedback, members rely heavily on the leader's model for giving feedback. The "piercing" members talk about in the quote below refers to the leader's feedback style that gives members a choice about whether to accept or reject her feedback:

M: I went compliant<sup>22</sup> with the group a second ago. And it, that I, I didn't want to give up the word "pierce." I didn't want. I thought an issue with Yvonne. For me at least, it was, uh, you know, a great example of "soft-piercing" and it did go through. You know, you know, *like a needle giving medicine that I need, but you know, didn't hurt very much at all*. Uh.

(November 2002, session six, line 27)

...snip

F: That, that is the piece that I liked about keeping the piercing. *But it was like she handed you the needle, but let you pace the injection*. Let you pick the idle that you'd like.

M: *That choice is very important to me* that you, that you took the information in. *She offered it, but it was up to you whether or not to take it* and you gave it to yourself and that's that's very important to me.

(November 2002, session six, lines 32-33)

As stated in these quotes, having a choice about accepting feedback makes it easier to accept. And exercising that choice gives the receiver a feeling of greater confidence.

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<sup>22</sup> Compliance is considered a defense used to ward off recognition of dissatisfaction or anger.

## The Licensing Group, Feedback, and Self Trust

Feedback is an important issue at this stage in the group's development. The authority issues group is over halfway completed. Once this group ends, the members can choose to convene a licensing group<sup>23</sup>. Part of the licensing process is giving and receiving peer feedback. If the members are unable or unwilling to give and receive feedback, they are not ready to take the next step in SCT training. There seems to be quite a bit of ambivalence operating in this AIG group, and the leader is able to help one member, doing the work for the group, see that the question has to do with whether or not the members trust themselves:

M: I have been struggling with whether I trust this group in a year's time [when the licensing group might convene] to be able to pierce me without being just withering. (November 2002, session six, line 217)

...snip

M: To get results of feedback and kind of trust the subgroup and can I trust the group as whole?

L(Y): Do you think, M, it really is "*can you trust yourself?*" Because you don't have to have any feedback if you don't want it. You can very easily say to the group, "I don't want feedback," or, "enough with the feedback," or "that is not (inaudible) stage for feedback." It is really up to you. *It is really not up to you to trust the group.*

M: Can I trust myself?

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<sup>23</sup> Licensing group: when members complete all training requirements and decide to seek licensure, they must participate in a licensing group. Within the licensing group context, members often give one another feedback on their skills as an SCT therapist.

L(Y): Yes, that's where it's at. (November 2002, session six, lines 221-224)

One of the greatest concerns for the group in regards to feedback is whether members can give or receive feedback without entering into stereotypical social roles. Can members give feedback without assuming a superior attitude? And can they receive it without assuming a victim stance? The leader works closely with members in the next transcribed session to help them recognize the various role defenses they use.

#### Session Nine: Fight Subphase Partially Emerges through Holding the Leader in a Role-Lock

In session nine of November 2002, members do a great deal of the work on roles through exploring the benefits and costs of keeping the leader in a role-lock with one member. Members articulate how maintaining this role-locked pair increases the sense of safety for the rest of the members. They feel confident that the leader will not "target" them while she is distracted by the role-lock. And the members let the role-locked member act out the regressive stubbornness for the group:

L(Y): As long as Yvonne is focused on M, you are all quite safe.

F: Right.

F: You don't hurt me, you hurt him

M: He gets Yvonne, the heat on him, and the rest of us can be good. He can hold the regression<sup>24</sup>.

F: And the stubbornness.

M: Right. (November 2002, session nine, line 152-157)

...snip

F: And it gets her full attention. He's the target. (November 2002, session nine, line 159)

It is clear at this point that the members who are outside of the role-locked pair are secure in their stance against the possibility of learning. They have maneuvered themselves into a position where they are unlikely to be put on the spot in front of their peers. By the end of this session, however, things turn around and the members begin to work with one another without communicating through the leader. This new relationship is very fragile and soon dissolves, but it is a step forward in the development of member confidence.

#### Week Five: April 2003, Sessions Two and Ten

The transcripts in this section are the last two transcribed session from this AIG.

Members in April 2003, session two, again speak openly about their fears of competition

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<sup>24</sup> Regression is a defense in which a person adopts a one-down or submissive stance, and expresses various behaviors that stall progress toward a goal. Unreasonable stubbornness, hostility, and assuming a victim role are common behaviors associated with the regression defense. "Holding the regression" refers to the idea that one person in a group is symbolically acting out a regression for the rest of the group members. The other members of the group gain the benefit of the regression (stalling change) without taking responsibility for the behavior.



in the group. A difference in the ways members approach these concerns is quite evident. They are able to voice their fears in a relatively straightforward way, and they work with one another, depending less and less on the leader for direction and guidance. In session ten, the members work with one another to choose a peer-leader, and the chosen leader guides the group through some work concerning establishing a licensing group. It is in this session that the group most clearly works without the support of the designated leader. The members achieve, albeit briefly, functional and interdependent working relationships.

### Session Two: A Work Session on In-Group Competition

Members make some startling discoveries about competition and its effects on interpersonal relationships. In the quotes below, we can see how two women volunteer to take complementary roles in response to their feelings of competition. In the first clip from the transcript, a female member expresses an irrational fear of “destroying” or harming someone else if she expresses competitiveness. The “it” she mentions is from previous work and refers to the target of anger.

F: In fear, so what I hold the group around competition and it's something about what uh, turning the other into an “it.” There's something about *I just feel like I'm going to destroy anybody who challenges me*. It don't, I don't encourage people to really talk with me. (April 2003, session two, line 61)

This member is afraid that she may destroy any challengers. She realizes that her fear of her own destructiveness discourages people from engaging with her. The next member, who sets herself up to be the target of others' anger, nicely complements this member's

stance. It is not hard to imagine how these two could become engaged in an extremely painful role-lock:

F: Yeah, that is just so easy for me, I volunteer to be “it.” (April 2003, session two, line 63)

....snip

F: And, and I really aware that I’m volunteering to be “it” and I’m also sabotaging my capacity to learn about the part of me that would make other people “it” and leave me freer<sup>25</sup>. (April 2003, session two, line 66)

Members in this session go on to explore other ways in which they do not fully engage in the group. This work is summarized in a subsection of this chapter, below, on competition.

### Session Ten: Interdependent Work

The last phase of group development is one of interdependent work. The characteristic defenses often displayed in this phase include a rejection of reality and loss of common sense (Agazarian, 1997). The group is still able to accomplish its tasks, but their work starts and stops as members struggle to get beyond their assumptions and deal with facts. The group first goes through a selection process and chooses one member to take up leadership in the group. The peer-leader then helps the group further explore the issue of convening a licensing group. During this exploration, members reveal that the time and

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<sup>25</sup> Being free or freer refers to the idea that the defensive behaviors often acted out by people in a group limit the ways in which they can change and grow. This is because they are vested in maintaining the familiarity of the defense rather than using their attention and energy to take risks, grow, and change.

travel requirements for a licensing group are the biggest deterrents to taking this next step.

The quote below provides an example of a peer-leader interacting with the group. She reminds the group that they are making assumptions (constructions) about time and travel requirements of the licensing group. She also points out that they do not have facts about how the group might actually run. Then she re-initiates the work:

F: So if I may, actually, uh, the subgroup is on the edge of subgrouping right at construction<sup>26</sup>. So if I may remind you that's, what we don't need yet (inaudible) ...I, I, and I'm, in the sake of time and all of that, *I'm coming in with, really clear, with the fact that the licensing group doesn't yet exist, it hasn't constituted itself and has not yet set a schedule for meeting in person, if that would happen*. So, let's check again inside to see what we notice about our driving and restraining forces to join the licensing group and let's start again. (April 2003, session ten, line 412)

After the group recognizes that they do not have facts about the time and travel requirements, they begin to voice two different positions. The supportive position is that members feel they are capable of working on the licensing task in a mutually supportive way. The resistance in the group is that many members feel they do not have the skills, yet, to become a licensed SCT therapist. The members do not reach a decision about a licensing group before the end of session ten. Sometime later, however, the vast majority of members do decide to establish a licensing group, and currently those members are completing this process.

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<sup>26</sup>A construction is a series of assumptions about something that shapes or influences the ways people think about it.

During this final session, members work confidently together to solve problems. The peer-leader demonstrates clear leadership skill, and people in their member roles support these leadership behaviors. The group is able to work without heavy reliance on the designated leader, Yvonne. These mature group behaviors contrast sharply with the emotion-laden frustration, rage, and hatred expressed early in this group. They also differ greatly from the exploration of defensive roles and stereotypical intimacy that occurred in the middle of the life of this group.

### Summary

This part of the results section has provided an overview of a very rich and complex data set. The overview shows evidence that the developmental phases of a group do indeed occur in roughly the same sequence as stated in theory. These data provide evidence that Agazarian's phases occur even in a group that is highly skilled and experienced in recognizing and resolving defensive behaviors. But much more information is available through a careful study of the transcripts. In the following sections, I describe in detail the different ways in which this group observed itself. I also summarize their work on competition and show how feeling or not feeling competitive affects how members feel about themselves, learn from one another, and interact with the designated leader.

### Member Observations

In her book, *Systems-Centered Therapy for Groups*, Agazarian (1997) encourages members to develop an "observing system," or metacognitive awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Agazarian, 1997). When people are simply aware of

their feelings, emotions fill their consciousness and they are aware of little else – their feelings become their reality. When metacognitively aware of their feelings, however, people can relate their feelings to what is happening around them and make connections between past events, present situations, and impulses, feelings, and defenses. Sometimes this kind of awareness leads to insights about relationship patterns, personal beliefs, and personality characteristics.

Agazarian (1997) differentiates between the Freudian concept of an observing ego and this observing system by suggesting that the observing system leads to not only a metacognitive awareness of emotions, but also an awareness of the self as part of a set of larger, dynamic relationships (Agazarian, 1997). Thus, the person with the observing system develops an awareness of his or her thoughts, feelings, intuitions, physical responses, etc. as experiences embedded in complex and changing contexts. As an example, suppose a group member becomes aware that the present dynamic in the group feels familiar. She may then notice an impulse to behave in a particular way. She searches her memories of the past and her current feelings. She identifies connections between the two. Then, she shares her awareness with the group, perhaps with the hope that others can identify similar reactions in themselves. If this is so, then she and those members are able to explore many of the connected feelings, becoming more aware of the ways in which they act out old behaviors in the current situation. As a result, the group-as-a-whole becomes a little more self-aware and complex.

A review of the longitudinal data presented in the transcripts provides an opportunity to look at how members use their observing systems over the two ½-year life of the group. The members observe different types of relational experiences. In this section, I present a recap of these different observations. It is logical to expect a developmental process in the members' powers to observe both themselves and processes within the group. These members, however, are already highly skilled in self-observation and group dynamics.

Despite their already developed skills, the members do seem to observe more complex processes and relationships in the second half of the AIG. Whereas they start out displaying excellent abilities to observe their own experiences from a person standpoint, they end up using their observing skills to discern group dynamics by the end of the AIG.

The group starts out by voicing what they feel in the moment; there is little or no meaningful insight associated with these observations. At various times, they proceed to connect the past to the present, observe the relationship between their behavior and various defenses, and tie together specific behavior and feelings to the group dynamics. These events represent the productive processing that group work often supports. Through the following quotes, we see a condensed version of productive group work made possible by advanced observing system skills.

#### Person and Subgroup without an Observing System

In this section, I show examples of two types of emotional experiences. The first is an example of a member voicing her feelings through careful self-observation, but without the benefit of an observing system. The second is a quote of a subgroup exchange where members are “acting out.” They vie for a superior or one-up position and target one another with sarcasm and anger.

Here is the first example of self observation. The member is very good at describing what she feels:

F: It's, you know, it's furious (tears), I'm just furious. I want to swear. I want to stomp my feet. Just furious, I'm glad I'm furious. I don't have any explanations, I'm just... (November 2001, session three, line 56)

This member describes herself as *being* rather than *feeling* furious. Although she does not connect her feelings to her context, she does a fine job of containing and verbalizing her experience without targeting anyone else or acting upon her feelings.

In the next quotation, members attack one another with little insight into the feelings motivating this behavior. A power struggle is salient as members reject, shame, and correct one another.

M: I hate you all for ignoring me.

F: Well, come in at this level of energy.

M: I was at (an) above level. (May 2001, session ten, lines 78-80)

...snip

M: Male-name, welcome.

M: Well fuck you.

M: Good.

F: Yeah, fuck you. (May 2001, session ten, lines 84-87)

Here we can see the attempts to establish a superior position (“come in at this level,” “I was at (an) above level,” “male-name, welcome”) and then some member targeting. These quotes give a good example of interaction without an awareness of the emotional information that gives rise to the verbalizations.

### Yvonne's Comments about the Process of Developing an Observing System

This section provides several quotations from the group leader explaining the observing system. These comments occur as the leader helps members achieve a more objective awareness of their experiences. She first provides a map for living with an observing system. She does this because many members idealize the learning process. A common fantasy is that members will someday be free of the burden of past events. Members harbor the wish never again to have to work hard for understanding of themselves or their defenses. Yvonne reassures the members that they can attain a place where they no longer mindlessly act out old behaviors, but they will continue to have opportunities to grow and learn about themselves:

L(Y): You can't, look you can't give up the acting out until you get to the roots. And then the best that you can ever do is recognize how it turns out over and over again in more subtle forms and undo that. This is just a lifelong project. (November 2001, session six, line 1)

Yvonne reminds the group that self-awareness is process, not an event. Next, she helps a member build a bridge between her internal experience and her member role in a subgroup. The member role requires that members bring data into the group in a form that is useful for the subgroup or group-as-a-whole.

L(Y): ... But now you have the information about what your body is doing, so bring it out in terms of information that you and the group can use. (November 2001, session six, line 67)



The process of transforming internal experiences into group-useful data requires members to (1) gain a metacognitive view of the experience, and (2) maintain the member-role by interacting with other members for the good of the group.

An important requirement of an observing system is letting go of compulsive attachments to old stories and rote behaviors. In the next quote, Yvonne helps a member step back from a painful childhood experience to see how she replicates the dynamics of that experience in the group. She encourages the member to reclaim important parts of herself that she had previously disowned. The leader helps the member let go of her fascination with the old, traumatic story. She does this by showing the member that the story is not nearly as important as the member-in-the-present:

L(Y): You see the issue right now isn't the emotion, the issue was this incident in your childhood. What was your relationship to it and how do you repeat it in group in such a way that you sabotage yourself and the group? (pause) It's the difference between living in the split and telling the old tale, living in fact in the authority issue of actually doing the intimate kind of work that started yesterday where you really go down and experience the parts of yourself that you didn't know you had. So, (November 2001, session six, line 226)

Part of developing an observing system entails becoming aware of the satisfaction gained in telling the oft-told tale. Once the member releases herself from the past, even temporarily, she can begin to see patterns and connections. After this intervention, the member is able to see how her past trauma continues to shape her relationships in the present, and she is able to regain some conscious control over her behavior. In the quote below, Yvonne gives this whole process a name:

L(Y): Turn on your *observing self-system* and see what you know. And then share it in the group and subgroup. (November 2001, session six, line 274)

And in this next quote, Yvonne place value on the observing system and points out the benefits of doing this sometimes-painful work:

L: That's what's so lucky about being human ... whenever there's an ouch, if you can go down ... you discover the important thing, or part of yourself the you weren't free to *be*, because it's being shamed at some point. ... freeing the parts of yourself ... (November 2001, session nine, line 192)

Through these comments, Yvonne presents the process and results of an observing system. An observing system requires members to explore beyond the pain experienced in their past. In doing so, they discover the parts of themselves they have disowned. The observing system reveals to them their interpersonal behavior patterns, expressed in the present that were shaped by painful past events. These patterns set up the dynamics to re-live those painful events.

The reward of this work is an increase in self-knowledge and power as members gain greater awareness of and control over the behaviors that determine the evolution of future relationships. It moves members away from the illusory safety of the known and into the unknown. And it allows members to bring useful information into the group – information that is less confounded by assumptions that do not apply to the current context. The person, the subgroup, and the group-as-a-whole can then use to continue its development.

## Exploring the Present

The members in the group are experienced in the techniques taught in SCT. They have learned how to differentiate between thoughts and feelings. They know the difference, at least in theory, between feelings generated by experiences inside the group and those generated by memories of the past or concerns about the future. Through repeatedly establishing affective connections with others in the subgroup, they have learned to maintain an awareness of their internal states while exploring a shared experience. In this first quote, we see subgroup members exploring their feelings of sleepiness:

F: No one else is slipping away, detached or sleepy? I am holding<sup>27</sup> [the experience of feeling sleepy while waiting for others to join this subgroup.]

F: I am, Fem-name. I found myself slipping away and getting too comfortable and sort of drifting off ... kind of floating up to the top in a comfortable way. Just sort of starting to day dream and...

F: I don't have comfort, but I have slipping away. (May 2001, session two lines 113-115)

The members are simply observing their feelings. They are not confusing thoughts with feelings, and they are not connecting their feelings to what might be happening in the group, what they did the night before, their physical conditions, etc. They are making explicit the difference between certain feelings (slipping away vs. comfort.) An important

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<sup>27</sup> Sometimes the term, "holding" refers to maintaining awareness of an affective experience while waiting for other members to find it in themselves and establish a connection with the holding member.

part of an observing system seems to be the ability to notice nuanced feelings, and working within a subgroup helps develop this ability.

In the next quotation, members interact to explore their feelings, and it appears that they get a little carried away with the process. The energy seems to be building in the subgroup, shifting toward being more defined and specific:

M: Wanting to destroy, wanting to win, wanting to kill [inaudible],  
wanting to be met where I'm at.

F: It's wanting to be met where I'm at. (May 2001, session ten, lines 40-41)

...snip

F: It's wanting to be number one. It's wanting to be number one. It's wanting to be the first, the best... (May 2001, session ten, line 44)

...snip

M: And nobody else is better. (May 2001, session ten, line 48)

This kind of attuned exploration should lead members to first exploring the similarities in their experiences, and then to see subtle differences. This process allows a member to embrace fully one aspect of her or his emotions.

### Connecting the Past to the Present

In this next set of quotations, we see a member connecting her childhood behaviors to her current ways of manipulating or discounting members in the group. This connecting the past to the present is an important first step in discovering the patterns and habits that

regulate behavior. The next step, of course, is to determine whether they are of benefit to the person, or a source of difficulty.

Here the member acknowledges her behaviors, the gain from them, and the pleasure she receives:

F: In offering (my comments) in the group, I open my eyes wide and take on an innocent look and I have a way of, a something, charm, to have that to keep any, uhh, I'm not sure.

L(Y): F, do you know where that came from? (November 2001, session six, lines 68-69)

Once the member has identified the behavioral habit, the leader helps the member understand this behavior in the context of her past:

L(Y): So, how did it work? Did it take a lot of energy and did it give you pleasure or what? (pause) Where did it come from?

F: It was pretty easy. I think that it, uhh, it gave me pleasure, gave me pleasure to look (makes gesture?)

L(Y): And what did you get?

F: What did I get from that? I got the, uhh, a lot of attention from my father and, uhh, my older brother, a lot. (November 2001, session six, lines 71-74)

The member is able to identify that it gives her pleasure to enact the gesture. The leader then helps her discover how she uses the behavior in the present, and what it might cost her:

L(Y): So, in this group, does it work for men as well as women? I mean women as well as men? (pause)

F: Not as well.

F: Only when I treat them as men.

F: What?

F: Only when I treat them as men. There are some women I treat as men in this group, and I do it. And the women I treat as women, I dismiss.  
(November 2001, session six, lines 76-80)

Here, the member is able to realize that she discounts or dismisses some of the women in the group – probably those who do not respond to her gesture with increased attention. In this exchange, the leader models the framework of an observing system – helping the member identify a behavior to question, and then asking specific queries into the history and effects of the behavior.

In the next quote, a member explores how the actions of others in his past, and their effects upon him, shape his behavior. He also acknowledges that he is less likely to respond in the old ways, but the tendency remains to re-create familiar, although extremely painful, relationship patterns:

M: I have a real block to be able to take, to be able to take it (feedback), because I was so used to having it smacked into me growing up. I want to be able to hear it when it's not being smacked into me, so that I don't have to wait for that.

Ms: Mmm hm.

M: Or slide back into the old version of being shaken up to the core. That doesn't happen anymore.

M: Right.

M: That I can, I can, *I can feel the pull to recreate that.* (November 2002, session six, lines 154-158)

This member seems to be not only developing new relationships, but also developing an awareness of “the pull” to re-create past patterns. Part of the observing system entails the ability to recognize the continuing urge to enact old relationship or automatically act out defenses even when current circumstances do not call for them.

### Connecting Behavior with Defenses

There seems to be a variety of ways people avoid gaining new knowledge or awareness of themselves. In this next section, members share instances of awareness of their automatic defenses.

In this first quotation, the member is stimulated by another member's comment. He states that he did not know how to respond, so he does not do anything – he ignores the feeling.

M: Yeah, yeah I want to say that when you said what you did, Male-name, it resonated [with] something in me. I didn't know what to do with it, but I didn't do anything with it, and in that sense dropped it. In a way, I dropped a part of me. (May 2001, session six, line 101)

Unfortunately, this member loses the opportunity to learn something new. He also loses the opportunity to add meaningfully to the work of the group. Below, a member recognizes an automatic defense, and connects her internal experience with its effects on her ability to function in the group. She demonstrates an advanced ability to perceive her impulses, connect them to her perceptive abilities and possible action:

F: The piece I know is, um, the taking-care-of has me worried. I, I know internally if it feels care-taking to me and if I can authentically join ... I was also clear that it was blocking me from seeing anything else that went on ... I was hoping Yvonne would do something. (November 2001, session three, line 200)

This is a wonderful example of someone recognizing an impulse, how it limits her, and her defensive reaction to it. She discovers that she becomes helpless and relies on the leader, Yvonne, to fix the situation.

In the next quotation, a member reveals a defensive behavior, realizes the defensiveness, and then acts it out in the group. Her behaviors illustrate the automaticity of defenses. Being aware of a defense is not sufficient to stopping them. As Yvonne stated early on, the members have continuing opportunities to recognize increasingly subtle expressions



of common defenses. The benefit of working in a group, in part, lies in the continuous stimulation of defenses coupled with support while members learn about themselves.

This member starts by revealing one way in which she defends against feeling vulnerable in the group: she pulls members into a personal relationship.

F: OK. One way I'm sneaky in here is by creating personal relationships with people so I won't be left in the group as a member. I just got that.

L(Y): Can anyone else join at the same level as that?

M: Well, I'm sneaky in, with people I want to keep certain relationships. The piece of information is that the forcefield that got sent was actually not the final one I did and I realized that's...

F: Whoo, yeah, feels big, given that I just told you today that I was very moved by yours.

L(Y): So, right this moment, Fem-name, you're acting out your very thing that you just identified, which is that you took Male-name's information personally and then you pulled him into you, in personal relationship.

F: Ok.

L(Y): Which is the really useful to the group and maybe you're just a little hard on you. (November 2001, session six, lines 13 – 19)

The group has the opportunity to benefit from this interaction, and the member has a concrete example of how she acts out her defense.

Below, a member realizes that there is a conflict between two desired behaviors. In response to the internal conflict, he stops interacting in the group:

M: ...I want to be defiant and give them what they want at the same time. I want to give them what they want, but on my terms. And what I do a lot is to push myself down and to not fill my space, to not speak up ...  
(November 2001, session six, line 91)

This is a good example of a member connecting his emotions to his in-group behaviors. Again, the cost of the defense is both failing to learn about the self and depriving the group of an opportunity to learn more about the dynamics active in the group.

In this next section, two members work together. The woman begins the work by asking for assistance. She uses a great deal of the SCT language, claiming to be in member-role, but in fact coming from a very self-oriented place. The man who responds to her realizes that she is coming from a self-oriented role, acknowledges the SCT language, and voices his conflict – should he react to the language or the behavior?

F: Okay, then I have a distraction. I want to know from the group what they're seeing, because I lost my resources. I want, I didn't want to lose my resource as member. I've been in here as member the whole time. It was very specific. I just wanted to handle it and move on so what is the group seeing that I'm not seeing? In me. Right now. (April 2003, session two, line 191)

...snip

M: Right this very moment? Well, I hear you asking for feedback, and using something about distraction, which has a trump power in the group, and that makes it hard for me to know what to give you: the floor or feedback. (April 2003, session two, line 193)

The member quoted below also reacts to her statement. In it, we see the member mirror the helplessness in the first response (losing any resource), and label the behavior (a distraction (in the SCT sense) and non-functional leadership). Her internal response, depending upon the leadership to “fix” the situation, also mirrors the dependence of the first statement:

F: ... I looked in this pleading way at Susan (the co-leader) (laughter) so I was, I was losing any resource I have, and what to do with it and just sort of, “Mom, help” ... The trump power, all of that, I saw all of that happening as a, as a leadership thing that wasn’t fully functional and I didn’t know how to communicate about ... “Please find a way to talk to her about this” as though it was about her and as though Susan should come in and rescue me from the quandary of how do we work with our blind spots around our, the way, we lack leadership in our function. (April 2003, session two, lines 191-200)

This member is able to generalize the issue in the group to a larger issue – how do members respond when people – either the self or someone else – fails to see an issue or has a blind spot? How do members develop functional leadership skills? This member demonstrates many levels of awareness – she can observe her internal experience, place other’s behaviors in context, identify her own defensive actions, and look at the issue on the level of the group-as-a-whole.

## Summary

Many psychotherapists hold that, in the usual course of psychotherapy, most clients start out by telling their therapist about what other people have done to them. There is a strong tendency for clients to take a victim stance and feel helpless in the face of bewildering interpersonal crises. When psychotherapy works, clients often gain a sense of agency in their lives – they feel more powerful and are better able to determine how they react to events and what kinds of relationships they form. More and more, psychological processes are viewed as occurring within a network of meaningful relationships. Social interactions affect not only clients' values and beliefs about others, but also how they view themselves and how they automatically respond to the world around them.

One of the first skills built in SCT is the skill to observe nuance within one's experience. Members are taught to distinguish between thoughts and feelings, past and present, predictions and facts (Agazarian, 1997). Members gain increasing abilities to recognize their defenses and not engage in them. As a result, what the members can observe changes. As shown in this section, members possess the ability to observe themselves in context. They not only were able to recognize behavioral patterns established in early childhood, they could see how these behaviors, expressed in the present (1) shape what they can perceive and (2) limit the array of their possible responses. Members displayed the ability to see connections between many layers of responses – from personal past, to present feelings, to current defenses, and to group-as-a-whole dynamics. During two sessions – one near the middle and one near the end of this three-year period, the members of this group used their skills of observation to explore the effects of intra-group competition on their abilities to learn from and participate in group processes. The next section analyzes the text to uncover these effects.

## Competition, Member Participation, and Leadership

The Authority Issues Group is one context in which members hone their skills as leaders and teachers in Systems-Centered Therapy. They learn these skills by practicing leadership behaviors and addressing the thoughts, feelings, and role behaviors that influence intrapsychic processes, interpersonal relationships, and group-as-a-whole dynamics. A careful reading of the transcripts reveals that competition affects all of these.

### How Competition affects Members' Private Feelings and Perceptions of Self

Many people are both curious about and have difficulty discussing competition. The members of this group find that discussing competition with fellow group members seems particularly difficult; there seems to be some sense that competitive feelings are inappropriate to the training group context. This first quote shows these feelings of curiosity and discomfort:

F: I'm really having a lot of energy come up in this discussion [on competition.] Noticing that where we are as a group is at the level of competing and it feels like I want to see what happens here. I want to see how do we do as a group now. It didn't feel like this would have worked where we were three times ago but it feels like where we are now...I, I want to see where this takes us.

M: That makes me so nervous.

F: Me, too. (April 2002, session two, lines 28-30)

Although members feel uncomfortable discussing competition, they are willing to explore the consequences of it on their leadership skills.

M: I'm very, I'm clear when I'm doing my work (outside of this group context) ... but when it's not clear for me is when I get stuck with competition. My competitive edge comes in, then it can shift me out of (the leader) role<sup>28</sup> very quickly and I, I need to be able to work on that because it happens. Um and it happens, it'll happen more in here than it will do in work because there's much more competition in here but, it, it can happen in my work too and that's, I have, that's an edge for me and that competitive piece gets, then it's... I don't know. *I can't trust me* is what I'm...

F: Yes. I just so resonate with that because I feel very different when I'm leading my own therapy group and don't have near the anxiety or self-consciousness that I have in this group and it's something that being with my peers, uh, that makes me really anxious and it's competition. (April 2003, session two, lines 52-53)

...snip

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<sup>28</sup> The leader role refers to maintaining an awareness of the group-as-a-whole dynamics, managing the boundaries between person, subgroups, and the group-as-a-whole, and helping members bring their attention, energy, and information in a way that is helpful for the group.

M: I also wonder if the competition *de-skills me in here because I'm believe I'm different out there*. Out there, I'm attuned<sup>29</sup> enough to know if I've slipped into narcissistic leadership<sup>30</sup> and to self-correct. (April 2003, session two, line 56)

These members recognize that competition can result in people dropping out of a functional leader or member role. They also realize that members can react to feelings of competition with a reduction in self-awareness and a more limited awareness of group dynamics. Some members report that their competitive feelings result in poorer leadership ability. They also allude to the idea that their goals change from working productively to defending themselves.

When members feel self-conscious, anxious, and deskilled, they quite naturally begin enacting defensive or stereotypical role behaviors. The defensive behaviors can then override the explicit goals of the group. The member below shares her defense against competitive feelings: going one-down or de-valuing the self:

F: I think a piece I hold<sup>31</sup> [about competition] *is making mistakes so I just take myself out of the running ... I'm, I'm aware that when I didn't send in my force fields there was this self-sabotaging piece in that, ... It was obviously about (inaudible) inviting that message come back to me... and I do that a lot*. (April 2003, session two, line 60)

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<sup>29</sup> Attunement refers to awareness of the totality of ones' own experience while also experiencing a psychobiological resonance or empathetic connection with others.

<sup>30</sup> Narcissistic leadership refers to times when the leader's interventions in the group are motivated by satisfying personal needs rather than working for the benefit of the group-as-a-whole or its members.

<sup>31</sup> Hold can also be used to refer to the idea that any one member in the group can be expressing for the group a particular emotion that other members feel but do not want to express.

The quote above (line 60) shows both a desire to be in a group that could lead to a higher skill level and a desire to avoid competition by consciously providing the leaders the opportunity to exclude her from the group. This member's comment resulted in others exploring how they respond to fear of competition.

The member cited below discovers that his desire to be "on-top" leads him to disengage from the group process. He withholds information from the group that potentially is important to both individual learning and group-as-a-whole development:

M: ... It's all about myself and, you know, being totally on top of it and ... I'm totally puzzled by how quiet I am in here because I'm not like this everywhere. But there's something about, something about the competition... if I'm going to really show myself then, I don't want there to be any mistakes. I want to be liked, just, you know, totally on top of the game and uh, I don't, I, hmm. I suppose that I don't like being so exposed in here ... (April 2003, session two, line 98)

As shown in these quotes, members avoid competing by inviting rejection (line 60, above) and by being silent in the group (line 98, above). These reactions are consistent with Wallach's (1994) theory regarding devaluing the self as a defense against competition (Wallach, 1994) and Sherman (1970) observations regarding risk-taking in competitive contexts (Sherman & Hildreth, 1970).

The member quoted below evades competition by becoming emotionally isolated and avoiding interdependent relationships with others:



M: Yeah, I heard, uh, when you said, “pack my bags,” ....like, I don’t actually leave but I, I leave emotionally when I pack my bags and go into some sort of alone place. ... if I’m going to compete, you know, I’ve got to put on the armor ... And maybe that is one way of competing, but that’s not how I want to compete and that’s not the way that I can compete that would bring out my energy and bring out the best in me. (April 2003, session two, line 101)

This member also articulates a curiosity about finding a positive form of competition, one that brings out the best in him. Many of the members share this kind of curiosity. The curiosity allows members to continue exploring the difficult topic of intra-group competition.

#### Members Observe Their Own Reactions to a Peer-leader

During a session when the issue of competition was particularly salient, one member asserted her will and stopped members from interrupting her. Yvonne, the designated leader, labeled her behavior as an instance of member-leadership. The group then used this event to explore their reactions to the peer-leader intervention. Some members find the comments irritating:

F: I’m irritated, actually.

M: Me too.

F: I really wanted to put it down. The word “bitch” came right into my head. (April 2002, session two, lines 103-105)

This could be an instance of members entering into a stereotypical superior stance. This stance can result in a rejection of any useful aspects of the peer-leader's interventions. Other members also went into superior stance, but with the addition of wanting to correct the peer-leader:

F: I wanted to fix the way she did it.

F: Yes.

F: And to, and to make rules about how we assert ourselves, and I wanted to label it as hacking.

M: I did too. I wanted to conform it and make it, it just perfect, so that, it's just the way I want. (April 2002, session two, lines 107 – 110)

Not all members took a superior stance to the peer-leader. Below, a member simply rejects her intervention by ignoring it:

M: I, I just didn't listen to what she was saying. (April 2002, session two, line 116)

And some made interpretations that changed the meaning of the incident:

F: I went into an interpretation<sup>32</sup> and explanation<sup>33</sup>, “well every time Fem-name needs to get her voice in it (inaudible) and that’s what Fem-name does.” (April 2002, session two, line 117)

In all the above quotations, members recognize that they are devaluing the peer-leader’s interventions. Members recognized that their competitive feelings in large part determined their immediate responses to peer-leader interventions.

A few members were supportive of the peer-leader’s work:

M: I really liked it.

M: I wa, was like, “you go.” I mean...

F: I’m with you, Male-name, I loved it. (April 2002, session two, lines 121-123)

...snip

F: *And I supported it and I didn’t. I didn’t enjoy it. And, uh, and found it, um, use, it was useful, it’s like, “oh, that is something I do.”* ... (April 2002, session two, line 125)

As this last member pointed out, members can dislike an intervention and still benefit from it. It is important that the members allow the intervention be useful to the group,

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<sup>32</sup> Interpretation is a type of cognitive defense in which the person speculates about another’s unconscious motivations. The speculations can be quite elaborate and long-lived, effectively moving the person away from his or her here-and-now experience.

<sup>33</sup> Explanation is thought of in SCT as a cognitive defense that leads members to put their energy and attention into mental activities that take them away from their here-and-now emotional experience.

e.g., that they not let their feelings of competition lead them to automatically discount an intervention.

### Comparing Reactions to Designated Leader vs. Peer-leader

At the prompting of the designated leader, the group began comparing their reactions to the designated leader with their reactions to the peer-leader. They identified a number of automatic reactions that affected the assumptions they made, their affective responses, and how they processed information.

Members felt that the peer-leader behaviors involves risk and requires courage, but they did not consider the designated-leader in this way:

M: Yeah, I had a reaction, um, and it was first startled and then I, I liked the energy and I appreciated the stopping of the interruption. I felt it was, I, I, I *judged it as risk taking, courageous*, and I really appreciated it. I, I, I just think that, it took leadership and, and, took, took your own, took your own authority. (April 2002, session two, line 213)

No doubt, it is easy for members to appreciate the courage it takes to take up a leader role with peers. They seem more appreciative of the emotional demands of the peer-leader role because of their shared status and experiences.

Another difference is that many members can evaluate a peer's leadership behaviors, but they accept comments from the designated leader at face value. This automatic submissiveness to the designated leader could be a version of another one of the defenses against competition identified by Wallach (1994), e.g., isolating-the-self into a non-

competitive category (Wallach, 1994). The following member quote illustrates the members' fairly common submissive behavior.

M: I could hear the message and I could disagree with Fem-name if I wanted to, whereas with Yvonne I go submissive and fall in line to whatever she is saying. ... (April 2002, session two, line 240)

Members generally responded with the idea that they could think about and judge for themselves the usefulness of a member's comments, but immediately assume a submissive stance to the leader, taking her interventions as truth. Members discover, however, that they are freer to explore their thoughts and feelings in response to members' comments:

M: The impact, the impact on me when F does it is I tend to feel more equal. When Yvonne does it, I feel more childlike.

M: Yeah, I have a join on that. I, I *was able to take what you brought in without going one-up<sup>34</sup> or one-down<sup>35</sup>* and, and that sort of challenged me more because I, I had, to deal with it. And I go suddenly one-down with Yvonne by just assuming she's on track and we're all going to agree. It's subtle, but it's there and that's a join with what Male-name was saying, too. (April 2002, session two, lines 251-252)

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<sup>34</sup> One-up is taking a superior stance or enacting a superior role in which the other person's thoughts or feelings are discounted. Taking a one-up role is a defensive behavior.

<sup>35</sup> One-down is taking an inferior stance relative to another person. It usually involves disowning one's authority or ability to think or react intelligently to the stimuli that provokes the behavior. Taking a one-down stance is a defensive behavior.

Although they feel freer to evaluate and judge the peer-leader statement, members also feel more vulnerable and less willing to engage openly with the peer-leader than the designated leader:

F: Yeah. Yeah, because I get that piece, that it is not humiliating to lose to Susan and Yvonne. Losing to one of you guys, I've got a lot more at stake because I think we're competitors. I don't think I'm a competitor with Susan or Yvonne. (April 2002, session two, line 268)

Members, then, are far more comfortable in being open and making mistakes with the designated leaders than with one another. They see themselves and the leaders as being categorically different. This may be an example of the defense Wallach (1994) identified as withdrawing from competition by psychologically isolating the self (Wallach, 1994).

Members go on to discover and explore other differences, including differences in affective responses and in assumptions about the motivations for an intervention:

F: And it's sort of like, *I felt very angry in response to your [the peer-leader] intervention after that, whereas I don't feel as angry at Yvonne when she's actually correcting me. Something similar to what you said, Male-name, was like, "Oh, I," then I fall into line in some ways.* (April 2002, session two, line 244)

Various members make similar statements, e.g., that they are more likely to respond with anger, or with more anger, to a peer's leadership behaviors than they are to those made by the designated leader. And it is interesting to note that members do not consider the sadistic targeting of the leader in the earlier sessions equivalent to the anger they feel toward the peer-leader.

The group also notices that they automatically assume that the statements made by the designated leader are always for the good of the group-as-a-whole. Some members thought the peer-leader was motivated by a personal desire and that she was targeting a specific individual. Members find irritating any leader-behavior that is motivated by personal desires rather than by a desire to promote the good of the group.

M: Well, it feels different in the sense that, I felt something [in the peer-leader's intervention] was being directed at F, and she [the peer-leader] was saying, "stop it." When Yvonne does it, she's seeing it as the group-as-a-whole<sup>36</sup>. Not that it's not the same, but it just, it's just directed at the group-as-a-whole. (April 2002, session two, line 244)

This member assumes that the designated leader always directs her comments at the group-as-a-whole, or at least she makes interventions for the good of someone else rather than for her personal benefit. This member did not make this assumption about peer-leader behaviors, and several members seemed to resent comments perceived as being motivated by personal gain or as targeting individuals. This type of speculation about others' motivations takes the member's attention and energy out of the group.

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<sup>36</sup>Group-as-a-whole (GAW) refers to the idea that the group is an identifiable organism with its own dynamics. The dynamics present in a group are thought to dominate any individual's characteristics; members act differently in a group than they would by themselves. Further, the leader's task is to maintain an awareness of the dynamics of the GAW as the primary target for intervention. Due to the isomorphic nature of members, subgroups, and the GAW, any change in one level in the hierarchy will result in changes in the other levels. Intervening at the level of the GAW helps maintain a working alliance with all members of the group and prevents any member from being isolated and targeted by the leader.

In the discussion thus far, the group has placed all members into the same competitive pool. But some members found that their reactions to peer-leaders also depended upon the level of competition between them.

### Competing with Some Members, but Not with Others

The members discover that members are not equally competitive with all the other members, and this affects how they responded to one another:

M: ... I don't feel normally competitive with Fem-name, so I really welcome her leadership behaviors. When somebody that I feel more competitive with, like, M or M, for instance, or you, M, I, I react differently to leadership behaviors that come in. More, um, (inaudible) I've got to work through it to hear the message. (April 2002, session two, line 272)

Members found they were more receptive to and supportive of leadership behaviors from peers with whom they do not feel competitive. But members found that when they felt competitive toward a peer, it was more difficult to benefit from their interventions. Interestingly, this member felt competition with a number of men in the group, but not with the woman who exhibited leadership behavior. This is consistent with the theory that women are often discounted out of competitive relationships (Wallach, 1994).



### Competing with the Designated Leader

For the most part, members explicitly stated that they did not feel competitive toward the leader and easily fell into a submissive position to her. One female member, however, brought in the fact that she felt competitive with the leaders.

F: I want to know if there's anyone else (inaudible) – but I don't necessarily want to explore it at the moment – but anyone else (inaudible) feeling competitive with Susan and Yvonne? (April 2002, session two, line 280)

She makes this admission with the caveat that she did not want to explore her feelings, and she immediately sought the safety of a subgroup. She found a number of members who could join her:

M's: Yes.

M: I'm in there.

M: Absolutely. (April 2002, session two, lines 281-283)

...snip

F: I want to know. Male-name, Male-name, Male-name, Male-name, Male-name, Fem-name, Fem-name, me. (April 2002, session two, lines 280-290)

This member's desire to state her competitive feelings, but not discuss them, and then immediately seek a subgroup might indicate her discomfort and feelings of vulnerability.

Competition seems to make both differences in power and feelings of vulnerability more salient to the members.

### Summary

The members' work on competition shows that they tend to feel more self-conscious when they are in a competitive environment. If they attempt to take up a leadership role, feelings of competition distract them. They report losing, or becoming less confident in, their leadership skills when feelings of competition are active in the group.

Members found that they were far more likely to think critically about the peer-leader interventions than those made by the designated leaders. They were less likely, however, to voice a differing opinion with a peer leader. If the peer leader was someone with whom they felt particularly competitive, they found it more difficult to benefit from that person's interventions. This difficulty may arise from the one of the defenses against feelings of competition, e.g., taking a superior role that either rejects or invalidates the peer-leader's interventions.

Competitive members were more likely to assume that the motivation of the peer-leader is self-interest rather than a desire to benefit the group; they were quicker to feel irritation or anger with a peer leader than with the designated leader. Part of the reported irritation could be a reaction to leader style, but competition likely also plays a part in this reaction. Non-competitive members, when compared to competitive members, found it much easier to benefit from the peer-leader interventions. Regardless of whether the members felt competitive, many judged a member's leadership behaviors as courageous.

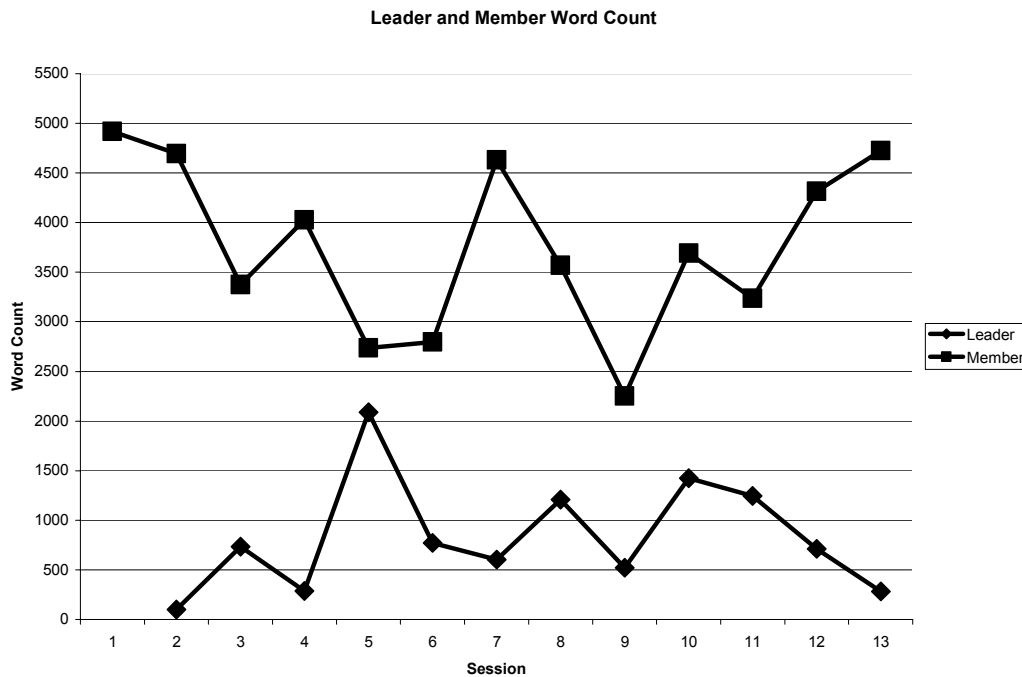
It seems clear that feelings of competition affect many levels of group interaction, including (1) members' self-perceptions, (2) members' willingness and ability to learn, and (3) the formation of interdependent and/or cooperative relationships. The members of this group repeatedly voiced a desire to find different ways of competing. Theory holds that the healthy alternative to these kinds of interactions is cooperation and commitment to the functioning of the group (Kohn, 1992). SCT theory has operationalized the behaviors that characterize cooperation in groups through its descriptions of subgrouping and the member role. These behaviors include being aware of internal processes and the larger network of relationships and dynamics in which the self is located. Members in member-role also direct their personal energy into the larger network in a non-defensive manner in order to develop the complexity of the system. And members accomplish all of this work in a context that promotes empathetic rapport between members with a shared goal.

### Linguistic Patterns

Many studies using LIWC have analyzed written essays or other written works. Often, researchers have correlated LIWC data with other measures, such as the Beck Depression Inventory or the Symptoms Checklist – 90 (Graybeal, 2004). In a few instances, however, researchers have used LIWC on transcripts of verbal speech, comparing speech patterns across time (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001), (Pennebaker & Lay, 2002). In this study, LIWC was used to detect changes in language used by members and leaders of an Authority Issues Group across a two-and-a-half year period. As you might notice below, there is a great deal of difference between the members' and leaders' use of certain words (like first person singular pronouns.) In interpreting these differences, the functions of the leaders and members should be born in mind. The leaders' role was to maintain the conditions in the group that would best enable the members to explore their thoughts

feelings and behaviors associated with the authority issue. The members' role was to explore their feelings, thoughts, and behaviors within a peer-group context.

The LIWC program identified 75.88% of the words used in the sessions and reported the results of the word counts in percentages of total words spoken. Here is a plot of the total word counts for leaders and members across the weeks:



**Fig. 1: Leader and Member Total Word Count per Session**

This graph shows the silent leader in session one. When comparing leader to member word count, it should be borne in mind that there were two leaders and between 16 and 22 members in each session.

The following variables were selected for further study because of their relevance to theory. This table is a modified version of the table provided in the LIWC computer handbook (Pennebaker et al., 2001).

Table Seven: LIWC Variables of Interest

| Word Category | Description                       | Number of words in category | Examples               |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Sixltr        | words longer than six letters     |                             |                        |
| I             | first person singular pronouns    | 9                           | I, me, my              |
| We            | first person plural pronouns      | 11                          | we, our, us            |
| Posemo        | positive emotion words            | 261                         | happy, pretty, good    |
| Negemo        | negative emotion words            | 345                         | hate, worthless, enemy |
| Anx           | anxiety related words             | 62                          | nervous, afraid, tense |
| Cause         | causal words                      | 49                          | because, effect, hence |
| Insight       | words indicating insight          | 116                         | think, know, consider  |
| Social        | words related to social processes | 314                         | talk, us, friend       |
| Excl          | words indicating exclusivity      | 19                          | but, except, without   |

The means and standard deviations for each variable per week were calculated. They are as follows:

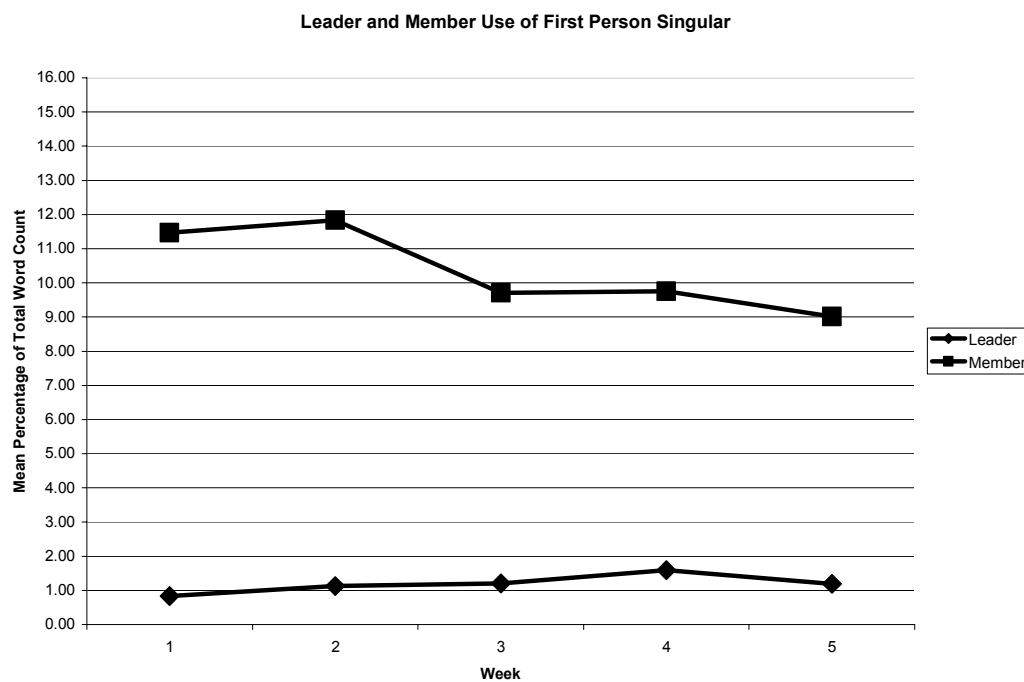
Table Eight: Means of LIWC Variables across Weeks

| LIWC     | Grp  | May   | 2001         | Nov   | 2001         | Apr   | 2002         | Nov   | 2002         | Apr   | 2003         |
|----------|------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|-------|--------------|
| Variable |      | Mean  | Std.<br>Dev. | Mean  | Std.<br>Dev. | Mean  | Std.<br>Dev. | Mean  | Std.<br>Dev. | Mean  | Std.<br>Dev. |
| Sixltr   | Mem  | 10.73 | 2.24         | 9.85  | 1.30         | 10.80 | 0.85         | 10.50 | 1.15         | 10.78 | 0.65         |
|          | Lead | 14.75 | 6.02         | 10.27 | 0.49         | 13.89 | 1.17         | 11.36 | 2.26         | 12.98 | 3.86         |
| I        | Mem  | 11.47 | 2.06         | 11.84 | 1.13         | 9.71  | 0.80         | 9.75  | 1.23         | 9.01  | 2.08         |
|          | Lead | 0.84  | 0.23         | 1.12  | 0.85         | 1.20  | 0.41         | 1.60  | 0.55         | 1.20  | 0.69         |
| We       | Mem  | 0.84  | 0.50         | 0.49  | 0.57         | 0.91  | 0.60         | 0.83  | 0.41         | 1.63  | 1.17         |
|          | Lead | 1.41  | 0.83         | 0.99  | 0.96         | 2.36  | 0.88         | 1.54  | 0.56         | 3.10  | 1.38         |
| Posemo   | Mem  | 2.56  | 0.78         | 1.87  | 0.54         | 2.68  | 0.73         | 1.93  | 0.84         | 2.45  | 0.59         |
|          | Lead | 1.71  | 1.83         | 1.45  | 0.41         | 1.74  | 1.75         | 1.82  | 0.66         | 1.09  | 0.04         |
| Negemo   | Mem  | 1.68  | 0.44         | 1.43  | 0.50         | 1.35  | 0.22         | 1.31  | 0.62         | 0.80  | 0.68         |
|          | Lead | 0.62  | 0.87         | 1.21  | 0.75         | 1.16  | 1.17         | 1.71  | 0.87         | 0.64  | 0.11         |
| Anx      | Mem  | 0.28  | 0.18         | 0.27  | 0.24         | 0.56  | 0.18         | 0.15  | 0.07         | 0.18  | 0.16         |
|          | Lead | 0.00  | 0.00         | 0.17  | 0.14         | 0.29  | 0.41         | 0.13  | 0.23         | 0.00  | 0.00         |
| Cause    | Mem  | 0.40  | 0.24         | 0.56  | 0.19         | 0.81  | 0.15         | 0.71  | 0.23         | 0.71  | 0.31         |
|          | Lead | 0.00  | 0.00         | 1.30  | 0.45         | 1.99  | 1.41         | 1.02  | 0.66         | 1.41  | 0.98         |
| Insight  | Mem  | 2.48  | 0.73         | 2.54  | 0.50         | 2.65  | 0.52         | 2.95  | 0.49         | 2.93  | 0.34         |
|          | Lead | 1.36  | 1.92         | 2.54  | 0.44         | 2.19  | 0.17         | 2.81  | 0.79         | 2.78  | 0.57         |
| Social   | Mem  | 5.79  | 1.22         | 6.55  | 0.84         | 6.73  | 2.15         | 7.37  | 1.66         | 7.29  | 1.49         |
|          | Lead | 14.75 | 6.02         | 10.27 | 0.49         | 13.89 | 1.17         | 11.36 | 2.26         | 12.98 | 3.86         |
| Excl     | Mem  | 3.48  | 0.95         | 4.90  | 1.23         | 5.20  | 0.46         | 5.33  | 0.53         | 5.39  | 0.31         |
|          | Lead | 4.18  | 0.25         | 6.21  | 1.00         | 4.88  | 0.12         | 4.19  | 0.14         | 4.97  | 0.47         |

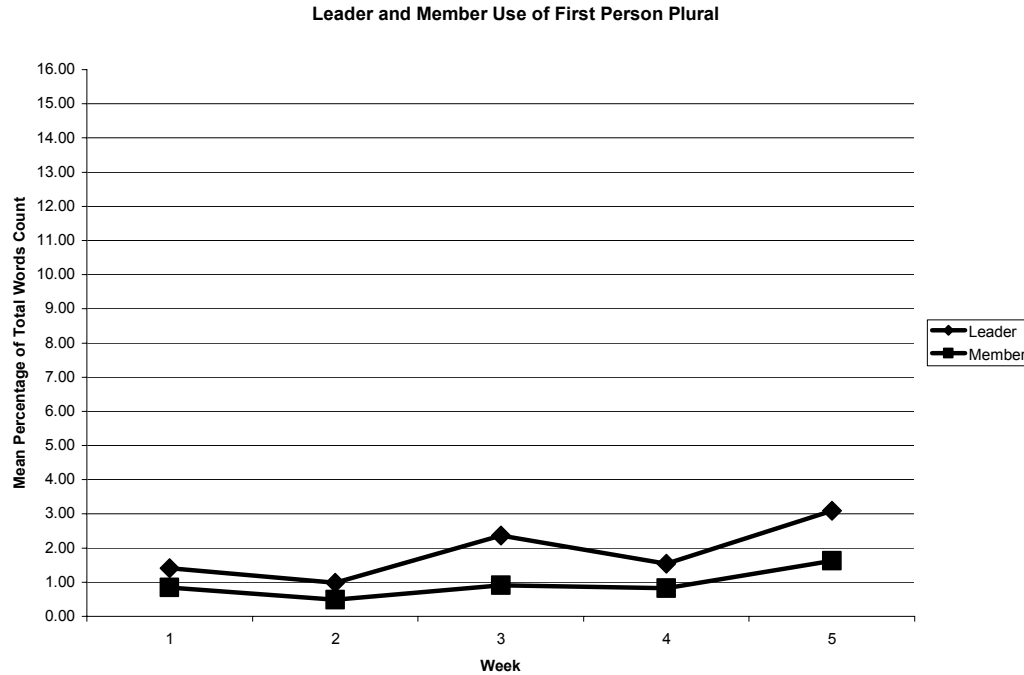
The means for the selected variables were graphed across weeks and are presented below.

## Use of the Pronouns I and We

In considering the use of first person singular and first person plural pronouns, I expected to see a reduction in members' use of first person singular and a corresponding increase in their use of first person plural pronouns as the group developed a sense of community and familiarity. Previous research has shown that this pattern occurs when feelings of collectivity increase (Stone & Pennebaker, 2002). I also expected that the leader would use far fewer first personal singular pronouns than the members, but her use of first person plural pronouns would increase over time and match that of the members' by the end of the AIG. The results show the following patterns:



**Fig. 2: Leader and Member Use of First Person Singular Pronouns**



**Fig. 3: Leader and Member Use of First Person Plural Pronouns**

Results show, as expected, that the members’ use of first person singular pronouns decreased and first person plural pronouns increased. The leaders’ use of first person plural pronouns also increased over time. Leaders used first person plural pronouns at approximately twice the rate of members. The leader’s use of first person singular pronouns, although infrequent, actually increased over the span of the group.

Negative and Positive Emotion Words

I expected members to decrease the number of negative emotion words over time, with the use somewhat correlating to certain developmental events in the group. For instance, members could be expected to use more negative emotion words when (1) struggling



with norming issues and (2) dealing with feelings of sadness and anxiety. Likewise, positive emotion words would likely occur when the group entered into the enchantment subphase of development, and might use more positive emotion words toward the end of the AIG when members are consolidating relationships and saying goodbye. I expected the leaders' to use emotion words infrequently across all sessions. This is because leaders normally do not talk about their own experiences in the group. And they do not name others' experiences as much as provide a framework for others to explore their feelings.

The actual results are as follows:

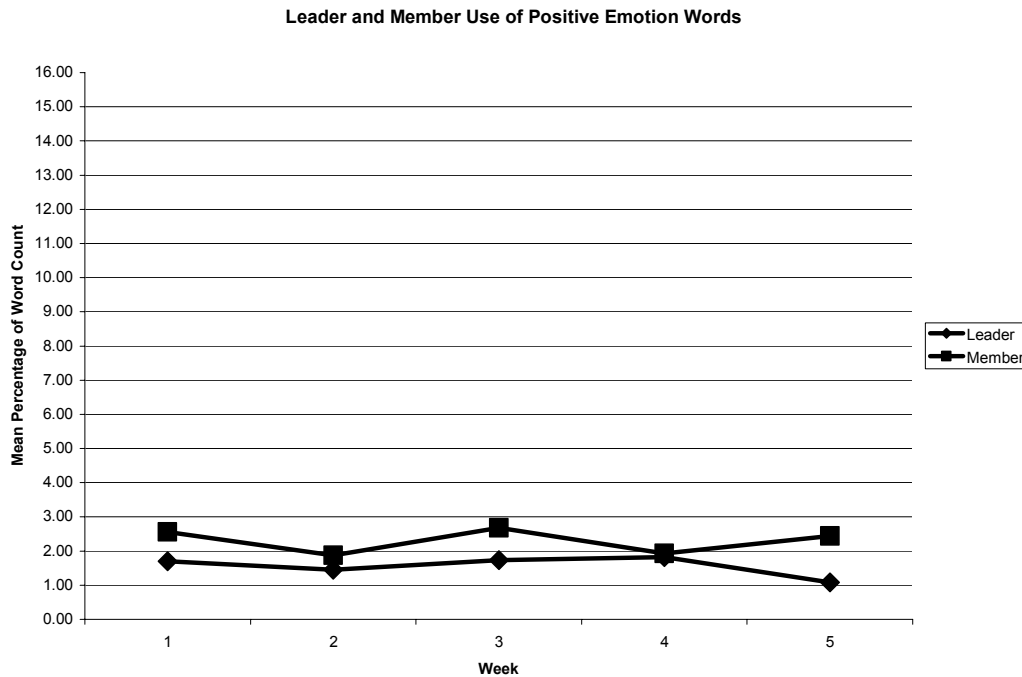
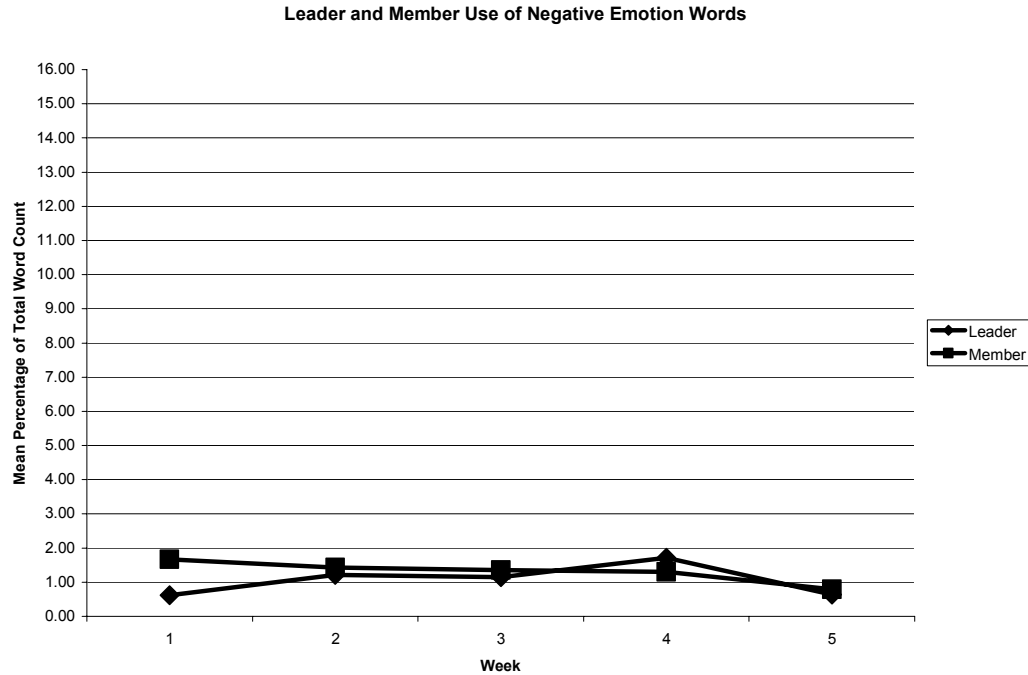
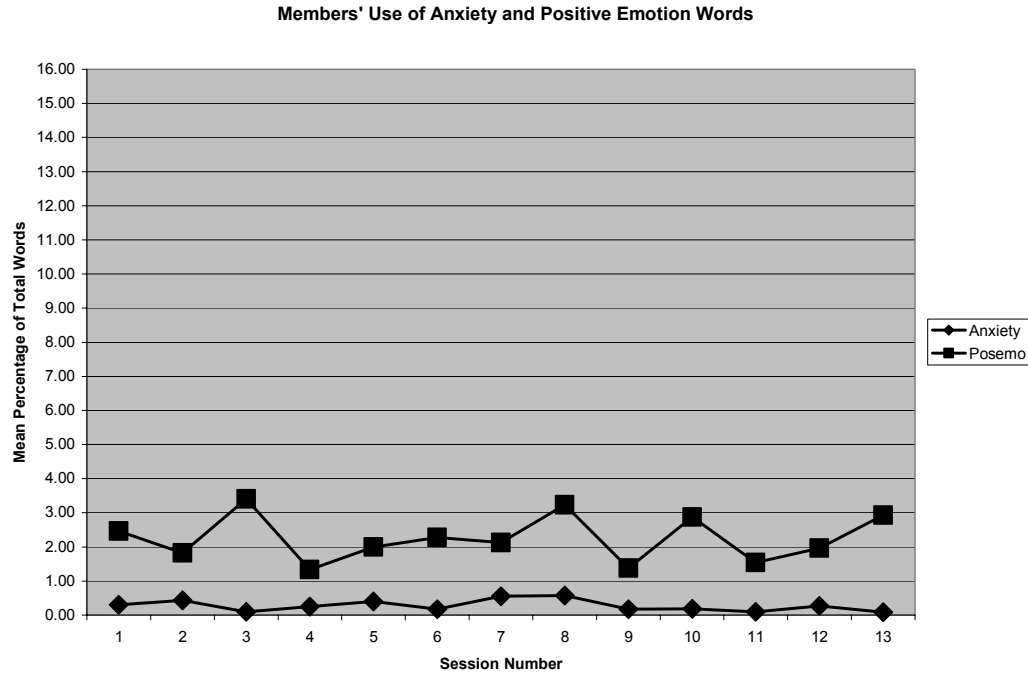


Fig. 4: Leader and Member Use of Positive Emotion Words



**Fig. 5: Leader and Member Use of Negative Emotion Words**

Neither members nor the leaders used emotion words frequently. There was a decreasing trend in the members' use of negative emotion words across sessions. Members' use of positive emotion words varied from week to week, ending at about the same level as it started. Although there was a slight decrease in the leaders' overall use of positive emotion words over time, the rate of negative emotions words ended near the starting point. Surprisingly, the peak in the members' use of positive emotion words corresponds to the peak in their use of anxiety-related words. In order to understand this phenomenon, I looked at the members' use of positive emotion words and anxiety-related words on a session-by-session basis rather than by week.

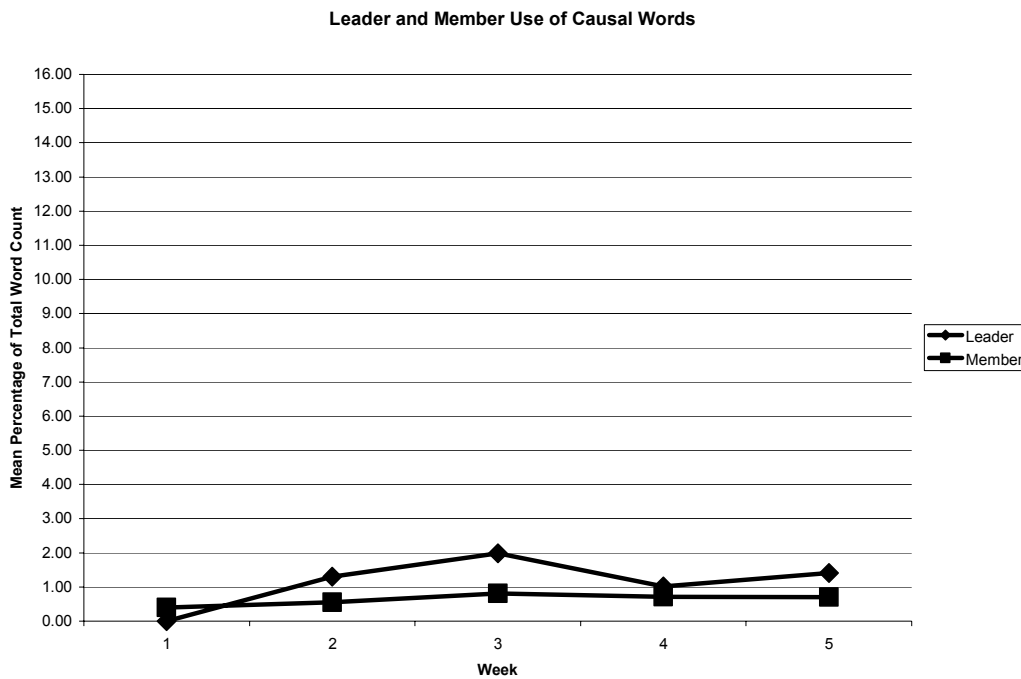


**Fig. 6: Members' Use of Anxiety and Positive Emotion Words**

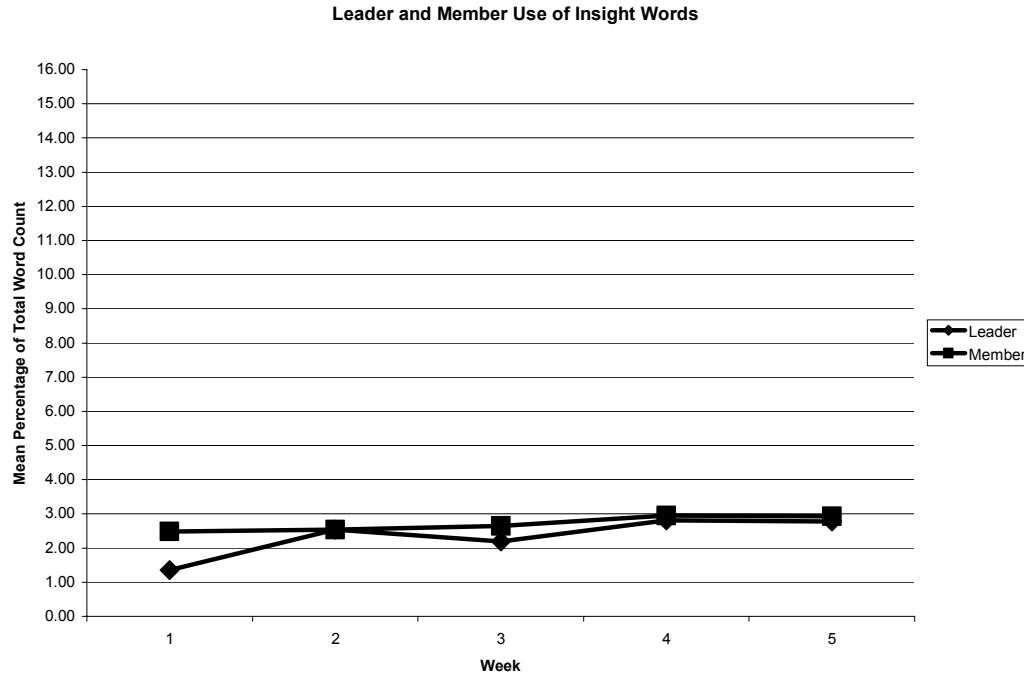
Here we see much more variation in the use of positive emotion words across the sessions, and peaks in the felt anxiety in the members during some weeks. Most notable is the use of anxiety words in sessions seven and eight, the sessions dealing with competition and castration anxiety, respectively. Members discuss competition again in session 12, with a related increase in anxiety. The positive emotions expressed in session eight had to do with the fusion fantasies and expressions of sexual desire.

## Cause and Insight Words

After gaining a sense of the themes of each session, I expected the members to use the causal and insight words more in week two than any other. During week two, the group processed barrier experiences, projective identification, and many of the defenses that cause members to enter into roles and role-locks. I also expected there to be a close match between the leaders' language and the members' language when it came to causal and insight words. The results showed:



**Fig. 7: Leader and Member Use of Causal Words**



**Fig. 8: Leader and Member Use of Insight Words**

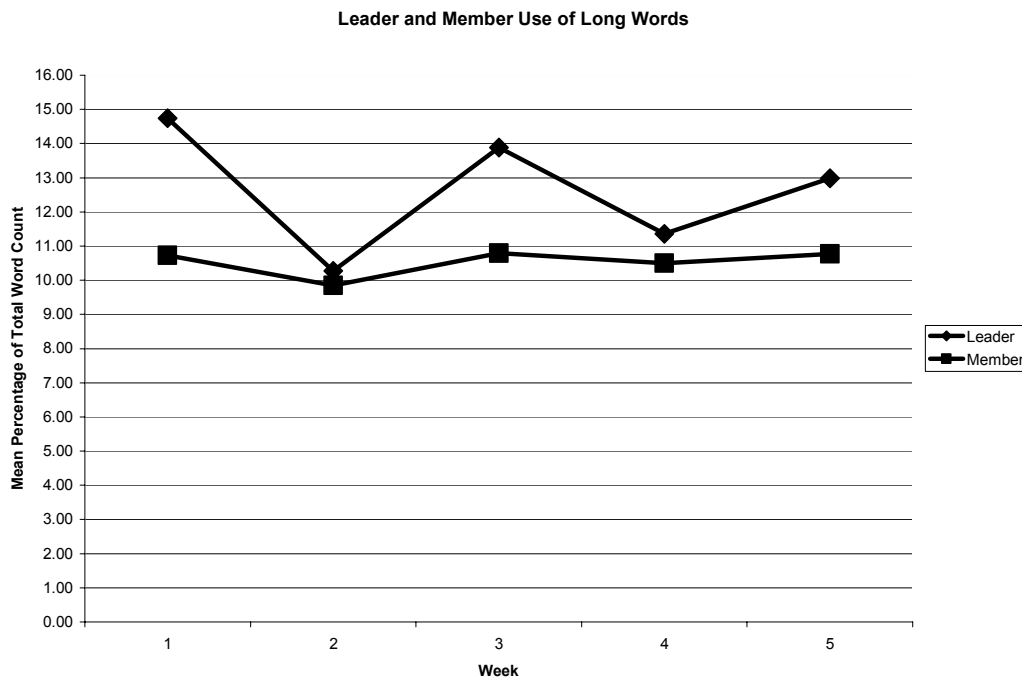
Careful analysis of these graphs shows that, although the leader uses a higher percentage of causal words, the variation from week to week on relative usage between causal words for members and leaders are similar. The variation between member and leader on insight words is also very similar with the exception of week two. During week two, the leaders used relatively more insight words than the week before or after. For members, there is an increase in insight words used throughout the two ½ years.

Previous research has indicated that an increase in big words (sixltr), causal words, and insight words correlates with increasing cognitive complexity (Pennebaker & Lay, 2002). The graph, below, shows the change in use of long words, which varies somewhat but does not seem to increase a great deal over time. In the current study, an increase in cognitive complexity would be consistent with Agazarian’s theory that groups, over time,

become more complex as they make increasingly nuanced distinctions in feelings, integrate those feelings into the group-as-a-whole, and transform as an entity into increasingly complex states (Agazarian, 1997).

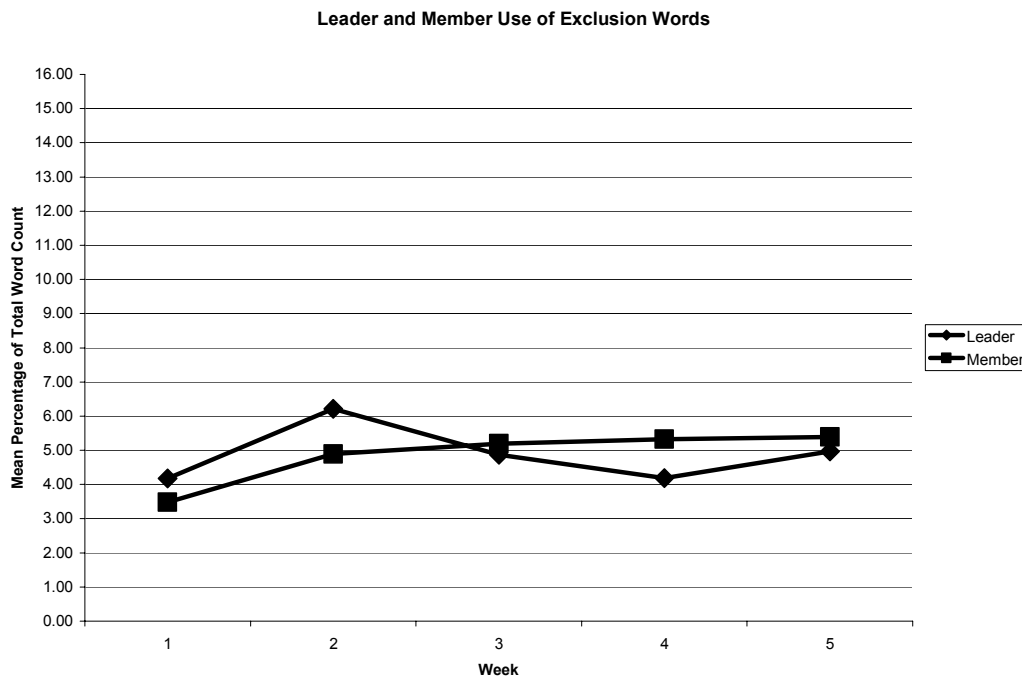
### Long Words (Exceeding Six Letters)

The use of words with more than six letters indicates the speakers are engaged in cognitively complex processes. This seems especially true when matched with an increase in causal and insight words (Pennebaker & Lay, 2002). Both members and leaders use similar rates of long words, and the variation of use across the week is similar. The data were plotted as follows:



## Exclusion Words

Exclusion words indicate that people are distinguishing what is and is not in a category (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002). Based upon the idea of the observing system and that working within subgroups greatly increases the members' ability to distinguish nuanced internal experiences (Agazarian, 1997), I expected the exclusion language to increase across time for members. I also expected the exclusion language to co-vary with insight. Here are the results:



**Fig. 9: Leader and Member Use of Exclusion Words**

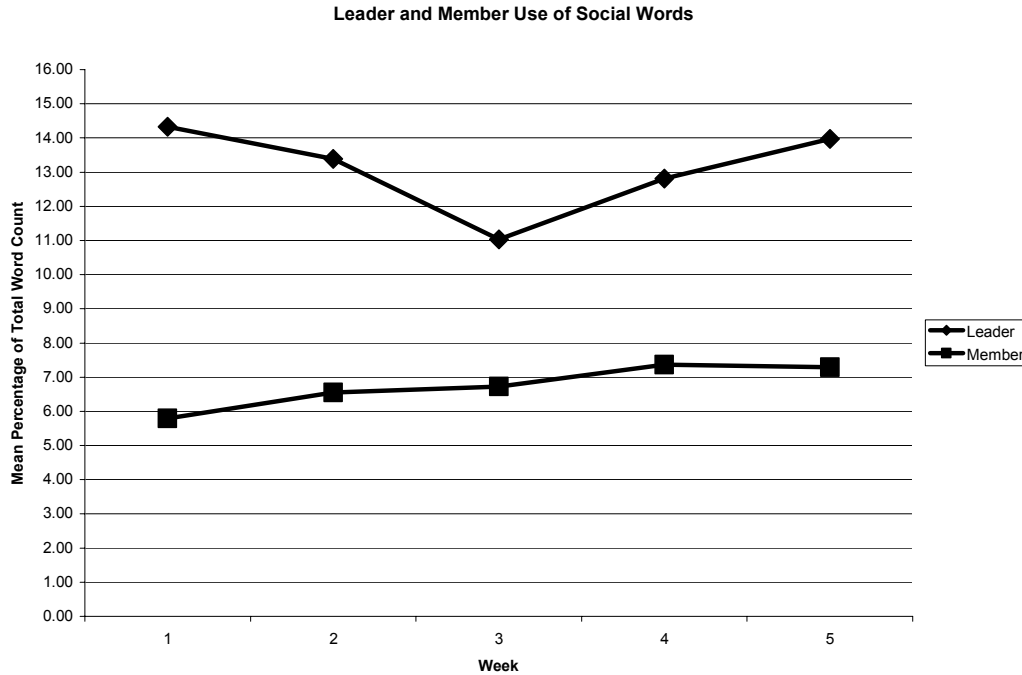
The leaders and members were remarkably similar in the percentage of exclusion words used. The similarity between the two groups ends there, though. The members used exclusion words more frequently over time, with the biggest difference between weeks

one and two. Week two saw the group size increase by eight members, and they seemed to bring an energetic commitment to making discriminations. The process of subgrouping, too, improved dramatically in week two, which would support increased use of exclusion language. The leader's use of exclusion words, although varied over time, ended up being very close to her beginning usage level. The members' use of exclusion words and their use of insight words seem related, with insight following exclusive language.

### Social Words

I expected that the use of social words would increase over time, with a fairly consistent rate of increase. I also expected the leaders' social words to be high in the beginning of the group, when she actively builds cohesion between group members. I thought that this would decrease over time as the sense of cohesiveness builds in the group. Here are the results:





**Fig. 10: Leader and Member Use of Social Words**

The members' use of social words did increase over time, although the change was relatively small. The social words and the first person plural words both increased over time for the members, and it is likely that the social words used in the group referred to group members, especially since members are encouraged to process their here-and-now experiences rather than talk about the past or future (Yalom, 1985). The leaders' use of social words dipped toward the middle of the span of the group, but remained relatively unchanged between the beginning and the end of the group.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this project, I describe the themes, processes, and change in language that occurred across a two and a half year period within an advanced training group whose members are mental health professionals. The methods I use are both qualitative and descriptive. In the following pages, I summarize important findings of this study, describe how some of these findings support one another, and relate them to existing theory. I also present limitations of this study and areas for future research.

### Summary of Findings

A number of important inter-related themes emerged from this study. In the sections below, I present summary information that partially confirms Agazarian's model for group development, and I provide some possible explanation for these findings. I also discuss the topics upon which members applied their self-observing systems and how members use this information to further the work of the group. Further, I recap the findings on the effects of intra-group competition, drawing particular attention to the ways in which the learning process and leadership development are impacted. Finally, I discuss the ways in which language changed over the life of the group and how these changes may be a reflection of group processes.

### Session Themes and the Phases of Development

In 2003, Agazarian and Gantt published an article regarding the controversy surrounding theories of group development (Agazarian & Gantt, 2003). Many theorists hold that groups go through a developmental progression not unlike individual development

(Rutan, 1992) (Bion, 1961a) (Bennis & Shepard, 1957). And like individual development, the group phases of development are not linear – groups experience and re-experience the various phases throughout the life of the group, depending upon the circumstances exigent in the group (Rutan, 1992). Other theorists postulate that the developmental phases of groups do not occur, and these theorists tend to focus on the dyadic relationships that formed between various group members and the group leader (Slavson, 1957).

The research on the phases of development have been sporadic and difficult (Beck, 1981b) in part because of the complexity of the group process. Researchers have used qualitative methods and linguistic analysis to analyze small group therapy sessions (Beck, 1981a) (Beck, 1981b) (Wheelan & Williams, 2003). In their 2003 article, Agazarian and Gantt question whether the current theoretical model of the phases of development apply only to less advanced groups or if the model also describes more advanced groups (Agazarian & Gantt, 2003).

The evidence resulting from this study supports the idea that this AIG group, an advanced experiential training group, passed through phases of development in roughly the same sequence shown in Agazarian's model. For example, there was clear evidence in May 2001, session two, that the members engaged in typical flight behaviors and by session six of that same week they were transitioning between flight and fight. The data contained little evidence that the group went into the fight stage next – which would be the next expected step in Agazarian's developmental model. Instead, during session ten of the first week, the group seemed to enter prematurely into the Intimacy Phase. According to Beck (1981), it is not unusual for groups to skip some phases of development or experience the phases in a somewhat different sequence than those indicated in the developmental models (Beck, 1981b). In this particular study, two items may account for the group's deviation from Agazarian's model. First, the data for the

study is a sampling of what occurred in the group. It is likely that important events occurred in sessions that were not transcribed and therefore not represented in this analysis. Second, the data show that the group later expressed the behaviors characteristic of the fight subphase of development and, in fact, remained in this phase of development for a relatively long time.

During the second week of training, held in November 2001, the group exhibited the behaviors that typify the fight stage, and the group stayed centered in this work for the entire week. They also began using their experiences as data for the evolution of the group. With this, members learned a great deal about the defenses (projections, barrier experiences, and roles) that keep them from interacting freely in the group. It was not until the middle of the week of April 2002 – the third training week – that the members finally transitioned into the disenchantment and anxiety subphase that normally follows the enchantment subphase.

The relatively long time the group spent in the fight stage is likely due to the nature of this group. Agazarian specifically designed this group so that members can experience and explore the many ways in which members use the defenses of compliance and defiance against authority (Agazarian, 1997). It seems clear that both the structure and the stated goals of the group deeply affect members' experiences. Again, this finding echoes earlier findings that (1) the purpose of the group and its goals, (2) the codes of behavior adopted in the group, and (3) the knowledge and skills of the group leader and members deeply influence group processes (Beck, 1981a).

In November of 2002, the fourth week of training, members once again explored their resistance to authority. They expressed the behaviors that characterize the fight stage in Agazarian's model, but at a far more subtle and sophisticated level. During sessions three and six, they focused more closely on their responses to peer leadership and feedback.

During the last session in November 2002, members wrestle with the ways in which they sought to disengage from the group leader. Throughout this group experience, members identified a myriad of ways in which they avoid working with one another as peers and with the designated authority. The automaticity of these defenses became apparent several times over the course of the AIG, and members were repeatedly surprised at the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which they avoided work in the group through manipulating one another and the leader. By April 2003, session 10, the group was able to work independently from the leader, although instances of this were brief. This work is consistent with the final phase of development as represented in Agazarian's model.

The data in this study support the existence of distinct phases of group development – the group passed through each phase and subphase of development as represented in Agazarian's model, although not always in the described sequence. A concern of mine, and of my debriefers, was whether the group leaders could manipulate the members into expressing the phases of development. An additional concern was that the members, who are intimately familiar with the development model, might conspire together – consciously or unconsciously – to express these expected behaviors.

Group events indicated that (1) the structure of the group, (2) the language and culture active in the group, and (3) the theoretical orientation of the leaders and participants shaped the experiences in the group context. This means that the members of this group are not autonomous; they do not function as independent agents in the group context. This assertion is consistent with even the earliest theories of group development (Lewin, 1999) (Bion, 1961a) (Bennis & Shepard, 1957). Given this, the ways in which the members create the tone of each session and the manner in which each topic arose were extremely complex and unlikely to be the result of an unconscious conspiracy.

In thinking about the issue of whether or not the expression of the phases of development occurs naturally, I compared it to the general question of Nature vs. Nurture. Is it human nature or the cumulative effects of human interaction that explain human behavior? The answer, of course, is both – human behavior results from the interaction of human nature with culture, society, or immediate context. Likewise, it is likely that the phases of development reflect human nature, but the dynamics active within the group largely determine the breadth and depth of the phases. Although the context heightened the degree to which these members felt and explored their defenses, and therefore the phases, the tendency toward those behaviors, as well as the cultural conditioning to suppress them, were likely latent in the group.

It is also interesting to note that phases of development, similar to those depicted in Agazarian's (1997) model, have been detected through other analytical processes in other types of groups, including work groups in business and groups of educators (Wheelan & Williams, 2003). The members of these groups were not familiar with the model of development, and the goal for the groups was not to directly engage in psychological exploration. This research used verbal coding techniques (Wheelan, Davidson, & Tilin, 2003) and then submitted these results to a computerized analysis that provides visual representation of the patterns of verbal interaction (Wheelan & Williams, 2003). Both thematic interpretation and language coding provide evidence that phases of development do occur in groups.

### The Observing System: What was Observed

Agazarian (1997) asserts that one goal for SCT group members is to develop an observing system. An observing system allows a member to distinguish between comprehensive, or thought-based knowledge, and apprehensive, or intuitive knowledge

(Agazarian, 1997). The goal of developing an observing system is for the members to tell the difference between perceptions based up the person-centered role and those based upon a systems-centered<sup>37</sup> role (Agazarian, 1997). The transcripts used in this study give us an opportunity to discover exactly what that means.

Prior to specific instruction in this AIG, the members used their powers of observation to distinguish nuances in their internal experiences. They seldom established a causal relationship between their current feelings and their pasts or the group context. However, the members did not engage in blaming others for their feelings and they did not readily assume a victim stance. This most likely reflects the members' advanced training in group processes and the SCT culture.

The members' skills in observing their internal states were further revealed once the group had stabilized sufficiently to enter into functional subgroups. During these times, members were able to observe their feelings while maintaining affective attunement with others. They made finer and finer distinctions between shared experiences and those experiences that were unique to each individual. The comparison process that occurs in the subgroup seems to assist members in acknowledging the nuances of their experiences.

Many theorists believe that psychotherapy in general, and group therapy in particular, introduces regressive forces in the psychological functioning of the clients (Pines, 1994). As this group progressed into the fight subphase of development and began confronting their defensive behaviors, members came face-to-face with painful past experiences. Rather regressing to the more primitive emotions, they were able to look at their

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<sup>37</sup> A systems-centered role contains the behaviors that reflect an awareness of the set of relationships extant in the group context. For example, the person in a system-centered role would be aware of his or her feelings and the ways in which these feelings are connected to the group dynamics. The contributions made by a member acting from a systems-centered role will be useful for the subgroup or group.

experiences in a different light. With the developing observing system, the support of the leader, and the attunement provided by the subgroups, members of this group identified personal characteristics and behavior patterns that shape and limit personal relationships and group interactions. They were able to do this work without becoming flooded by emotion or regressing to a highly dependent psychological state. Some were able to see how their automatic behaviors, based on painful past experiences, recreate the potential for similar pain in the present. Members recognized the way their defenses prevented them from gaining knowledge and exercising leadership behaviors in the group. And they grew to appreciate the automaticity of these responses.

One of the benefits of the group environment is the abundance of stimuli that motivates people to engage in defensive behaviors, laying them bare for observation and modification (Yalom, 1985). The data provided in the present study shows how highly trained psychotherapists use the stimuli and their reactions in a group to learn more about themselves and group dynamics. Members learned to question a behavior when (1) it resulted in pain, (2) it constituted a dominant or submissive role behavior, and/or (3) the behavior was either very familiar or it didn't match the current circumstances. These three circumstances seemed to be the indicators that a defensive role behavior had been activated. Once a member identified the defensive behavior, the member or the leader asked specific questions to bring about a greater awareness of the dynamics surrounding the behaviors. These included:



- 1) what stimuli activated the behavior and why
- 2) how did the person express the behavior in the past
- 3) what has the pay-off for it been in the past
- 4) does the behavior bring pleasure, and if so, what is pleasurable about it
- 5) how is the behavior enacted differently now than it was in the past
- 6) what does it cost now in terms of the ability to participate in the group process and in terms of interpersonal relationships
- 7) what is being avoided by enacting the behavior
- 8) how does the behavior relate to the group dynamics, e.g., is the behavior an indicator of group functioning
- 9) what are the alternative behaviors

Answering these questions often resulted in members seeing their behaviors with a different perspective, allowing them to participate more fully in the group experience. Investigation of the causal relationships embedded in role behaviors seemed to lead to instances of real insight, and as the group matured, the insights often had to do with the relationship between individual role behaviors and group dynamics.

Toward the halfway mark in the life of the AIG, members' observations shifted from the self to the roles they take on in the group. The members began to look at how each behavior affected the group dynamic, and they were able to connect these observations with their in-the-moment capacities to act and think in member roles. Over time, the members gained the ability not to just observe, but to observe multiple layers of experience. Moreover, they became increasingly adept at sharing their observations in a way that did not so much draw attention to themselves as it did to the dynamics in the group.

## The Effects of Intra-group Competition

Social researchers in America generally agree that competition shapes human behavior (Lewin, 1999). The research on competition is extensive, and usually entails observations of behavior resulting from mutually exclusive goal attainment (Deutsch, 1962) wherein one person reaching a goal means that all other competitors are denied the goal. Some research findings indicate that cooperation rather than competition results in higher performance (Deutsch, 1949). Other studies indicate that competition – at least between groups – results in better performance and increased efficiency (Mulvey & Ribbens, 1999).

The members of this AIG understood competition differently from the way most studies define it –mutually exclusive goals do not exist in an AIG. What the members seem to experience is both a desire to be seen as being more competent than others, and a fear of being harmed by others who are motivated to make others seem less competent. This understanding of competition most closely resembles the competitive structure found in studies having to do with graduate programs in a mental-health related field and the effects of competition in supervision groups (Bogo, Sussman, & Globerman, 2004). This research found that wanting to appear competent prohibited people from openly participating in group supervision (Bogo et al., 2004). Supervisees protected themselves from perceived criticism by remaining either silent or only offering examples of their work that promoted a positive view of themselves (Bogo et al., 2004). While preserving the students' image, these adaptive behaviors most likely reduced learning opportunities and might have led to less than optimal care for their clients.

This AIG group explicitly addressed the issue of competition during two separate sessions. As the LIWC data showed, relatively high levels of anxiety-related terms characterized the sessions in which members discussed competition. Competition, or their

fear of competition, appears to be anxiety producing. Members described their reactions to feelings of competition in detail. Overall, the effects of competition or fear of competition was extremely negative. It prevented members from fully participating in the group and it made learning in the competitive context far more difficult. Members found that competitive feelings reduced their perceived abilities to maintain the objectivity necessary for good leadership. They felt far more self-conscious and far less competent in a competitive environment. They also engaged in the defenses commonly associated with competition, i.e. devaluation of the self, devaluation of others, and psychological isolation (Wallach, 1994). These three defenses, like all the others, prevented members from learning about themselves and limited their abilities to contribute to the group.

If members felt particularly competitive with another, they had a much more difficult time benefiting from peer leadership behaviors or contributions to the group. It was as if they had to break through a negative assumption about the member before they could truly evaluate what the person was saying. Sometimes the negative reaction involved outright rejection of the member's comment. Sometimes it involved a rationalization about the member's contribution that effectively denied its utility. Often the negative reaction included assuming that the member was motivated by purely selfish intentions rather than by the good of the group.

Members indicated a complex interaction between being able to question, think about, and analyze leadership behaviors, and being able to voice one's opinion or reaction. Submissiveness to the leader prevented members from analyzing the leader's behaviors in the group; members were far more likely to analyze other members' contributions and therefore explore the nuances, implications, veracity, and applicability of peer leadership. But, because members saw themselves as non-competitive with the leaders, they were far more willing to voice an opinion or appear wrong when compared to the leaders. Members stated that they were generally not willing to be directly compared to other

members, so they said they tended to remain silent rather than voice an opposing opinion. This may have been a bit of an overstatement by the group members. The transcripts showed plenty of evidence that, within the context of a subgroup, members were willing to explore differences and voice objections to the views of other members or subgroups.

In our general social context, competition is seen as a healthy response that leads to greater productivity and even joy. Often, people speak of competition as if it is part of human nature, but there seems to be little evidence to support this claim (Kohn, 1992). An alternative hypothesis is that competition, and its opposite, cooperation, are learned behaviors (Kohn, 1992). If this is true, then competition is another role with an associated set of expected behaviors acted out in social relationships.

This study clearly shows that competition has deleterious effects upon member and group functioning. This group showed two sets of competition-related behaviors – a compliant, submissive role and a defiant, dominant role. Compliance and defiance are the hallmark behaviors associated with the Authority Phase of development. If competition is yet another set of compliant and defiant role behaviors, the expression of competition in the Authority Issues group is consistent with SCT theory. Within the context of a training group, the whole issue of competition appears to be yet another set of defenses.

### The LIWC Findings

Three of the selected LIWC categories showed meaningful changes over time. These included a change (decrease) in the use of first person singular pronouns (I-words.) This change occurred with an increase in both first person plural pronouns (we-words) and social words. It is likely that these changes indicate an increase in the sense of

community in the group (see Pennebaker and Lay, 2002 and Stone and Pennebaker, 2002.)

The second meaningful change occurred in the use of anxiety related words. Anxiety word use peaked in Week 3, sessions six & nine while members were exploring the effects of competition and processing castration anxiety. Overall, members expressed much more anxiety in the early weeks (weeks 1-3) than in the later weeks. In general, the focus of the work shifted from exploring personal defenses in the early weeks to exploring group dynamics in the later weeks. With this shift, members assumed a victim or other defensive role far less often, and instead, used their abilities in observation to learn about the relationship between their personal experiences in the context of their functioning in the group. The pattern seen in anxiety-related words might indicate that member anxiety drops when they assume a member role rather than a person or stereotypical defensive role.

The third meaningful change occurred in the members' use of exclusion words. This was the only variable in which each week's usage exceeded all preceding weeks. The biggest increase occurred between weeks one and two, and this change is most likely a reflection of the members' improved abilities to identify differences in their experiences through the subgrouping process. Week 2, session six, is also the week the group leader began explicit work with the members on the use of the observing system. The observations members made in the 1<sup>st</sup> week primarily pertained to their moment-to-moment somatic and affective experiences. Beginning in Week two, session six, members began exploring the connections between their experiences or habitual behaviors and their current abilities to participate in the group. This work required the members to discriminate between past and present and between intentions and behaviors. It is likely that the work of making these discriminations is reflected in the exclusionary language.

In addition to these changes, some other patterns of changes also occurred. For example, members' use of causal and insight words increased over time. Although the week-to-week changes were not parallel between these two LIWC variables, the overall trend of insight, causal, and exclusion words was similar. This may indicate that the cognitive processes that give rise to exclusion language can result in an increase in recognizing causal relationships and lead to insight. Although it is unlikely this holds true across all circumstances, further research in these relationships in training groups may be warranted.

Another potentially interesting co-variation occurred between the members' use of positive emotion words and the leaders' level of participation in the group. In those sessions when the leader was relatively more active, the members' language reflected fewer positive emotion words. During these sessions, the leader worked directly with individuals to (1) identify and help them emerge from defensive behaviors, and (2) identify projections. The leader also made assertions about member behaviors. Members focused on issues that negatively affect their abilities to interact in the group process. Although the members did not express an increase in negative emotion words during these times, the absence of positive emotion words may indicate the overall working mood of the sessions.

### Limitations of the Study

Most of the limitations of this study are the result of having used very complex archival material. The complexity of the interactions makes interpreting the transcripts difficult, and the archival nature of the data makes verification of the interpretations through interviews of the members impossible. I therefore employed a number of qualitative

methods in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations. These included prolonged interaction with the data – I literally spent years reading, thinking about, researching, and consulting with group specialists in order to become intimately familiar with the data and the assumptions upon which an SCT training group is based. This prolonged engagement with the data helped me overcome my own biases concerning the work done in groups, and allowed me to become intimately familiar not only with SCT theory, but also with other group theories. I was more able to place SCT within the larger framework of group therapy and experiential training as a science and art in Western culture. The long interaction with the transcripts also allowed me to think about the different phenomena I saw in the transcripts and eventually identify those items that, over time, emerged as being particularly important in the group. I made a number of “false starts,” but eventually identified and followed up on particularly interesting group processes that did not appear in earlier research studies. Luckily, the archival nature of the data eliminated the possibility that I, as a researcher, affected the group process, that the participants would give me distorted information based upon social demand created by my presence, or that somehow I would shape the events in the group.

Another method used to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations was the use of debriefers. Although the debriefers were experienced in qualitative research methodology, neither was familiar with the theories pertaining directly to group psychology. Because of the complexity of the group processes, the number of participants in the group, and the specialized language and shared assumptions of the participants, the debriefers struggled with understanding the transcripts. The debriefers’ duties did not include coming to understand the events in the transcripts; their primary duties were to make sure I maintained (1) an awareness of my biases and (2) methodological integrity in my dealings with the transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That said, we often struggled with the difficulty of interfacing with the transcripts. We started out with the debriefers reading a transcript and then all of us discussing it to get a shared general sense of the

contents of each session. Then each debriefer would take a more analytical look at the session and my interpretation, seeking to uncover the assumptions I made about each session. We eventually discovered that if the debriefers read my interpretation, then the transcript, and then looked critically at my interpretations, the process seemed to be a bit less confusing. We then used internet chats to resolve the many differences that still existed in what we saw or thought about my interpretations. Having two debriefers turned out to be a critically important component of the debriefing process – each debriefer was able to help me and the other debriefer untangle misunderstandings. There seemed to be a synergistic effect in working with multiple debriefers.

I also used theoretical triangulation to increase my understanding of group processes. Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that performing triangulation through multiple theories has inherent weaknesses: the fact that two or more theories assert similar explanations about a process does not hold epistemological justification, especially if one theory provides the basis for the other. While this is true, researching an idea through multiple, even related, theories can yield a depth of understanding that would not otherwise occur. In the case of this study, for instance, had I not investigated the entire concept of projective identification through psychodynamic theory, I would have not understood a foundational concept in the culture of the SCT group.

Another limitation of this study comes again from the nature of the data. The data for this study included both written transcripts of the group events and audio recordings. Originally, I also viewed some sample audio-visual recordings. The visual recordings were of poor quality, and I could seldom distinguish who was talking or any of the gestures or facial expressions made by the members. The non-verbal information would have added another layer of richness to the study.



Finally, the sampling procedure left out potentially important information in this study. The group met far more often than indicated by the samples, and no doubt, interesting and important events occurred in those sessions.

### Implications for Future Research

The data for this study contained information that connects with many areas of research. One of the more obvious of these was the ways in which members used SCT-specific vocabulary and conventions. The group had a shared vocabulary and manner or convention of interaction – established by the leader and learned by these experienced members – which likely (1) heightens a sense of membership in the group, (2) determines what can and cannot be discussed in the group, and (3) over-rides gender based language differences. Social psychologists have a long history of studying how language is used to establish group uniqueness. Specific vocabulary and context-sensitive topics have been found to promote shared attitudes and a sense of social identity in group members (Eastman, 1985). Viewed in this way, it is easy to see that groups use language to understand and transmit social values (Shapiro, 1985).

Members of any group belong to multiple and overlapping communities. The group languages, therefore, are likely to contain both (1) commonalities that bleed over from one group to another and (2) specialized language that separate the groups. For example, in the AIG, members belong both to the community of the Systems-Centered Therapy and Research Institute and to the larger community of social scientist-practitioners engaged in understanding human psychological processes. Future research might include looking at the ways in which the language in an SCT-sponsored group differs from the language used in other training groups or from the larger discourse of scientist-practitioners.

A subjective review of the data in this study showed little difference between the language used by male and female members, except during one session. When the men processed their feelings of castration anxiety and fusion fantasies, the women rarely spoke in the highly specific and sexualized manner in which the men were speaking. Previous studies have shown that differences in gender-based language usage increase when gender is salient in a group, with men using specific language while women use relatively more tentative language (Reid, Keerie, & Palomares, 2003). The effects of specific vs. tentative language have also been researched. Carli (1990) found that female speakers who spoke tentatively were more influential with men than women when compared to women speakers who used relatively more specific language. When comparing the effects of men speakers, the use of tentative vs. specific language made no difference in their level of influence. Given that SCT promotes a highly structured environment and a specific, meaning-laden vocabulary, it would be interesting to discover when topics override SCT convention and the effects of the changes in language on the perception of leadership ability.

There appears to be a relationship between group culture, which may override or increase gender-based language differences, and topic-specific determinants of gender-based language usage. Previous work on biases in psychological assessment has found that the language used to describe personality traits in English is skewed toward female-valued terms (Sankis, Corbitt, & Widiger, 1999). This same type of skew may occur in the adjectives used to describe emotions and internal feeling states during the subgrouping process, especially since women tend to describe more often feelings, motivations, and emotions and men tend to refer to more objective terms of time and place (Gleser, Gottschalk, and John (1959) as cited in (Mulac, Incontro, & James, 1985). Since SCT supports both specificity and disclosure of feelings, emotions, and motivations, it would

be interesting to determine if SCT trainees' language becomes increasingly gender neutral, masculine, or feminine as their training increases.

Gender-based behaviors may well impinge upon SCT group processes. For instance, a study in marriage and family therapy found that during couples' therapy, the clinician interrupted the female client three times more often than the clinician interrupted the male client (Werner-Wilson, Price, Zimmerman, & Murphy, 1997 750). In my review of the transcripts for this study, I noticed that interruptions occur during the subgrouping process, but I did not follow up on these interruptions to determine the conditions that exist when they occur. Determining whether interruptions and other types of break-downs in the subgrouping process are connected to the gender of the speaker might lead to insights about the unconscious interplay between gender and group behavior.

As the various graphs of changes in language indicate, there seems to be wide differences between the language used by the designated leaders and the members. Leadership and language usage in other contexts has been the focus of ongoing research. Some studies have investigated how people perceive leadership based upon language use in three categories: (1) procedural language, (2) task information, and (3) social-emotional information (Ketrow, 1991). In Ketrow's (1991) study, 150 subjects chose people who used procedural language as leaders 85.33% of the time. In comparing the peer-leader language to the designated leader's language in the data for this study, my informal impression is that the designated leader more often used procedural language, whereas members asserted leadership by using more task-oriented language. Members, whether in person or member role, tended to use social-emotional language. Connecting the various functional roles to both the types of observation being made and the language used to articulate those observations may help SCT researchers more clearly define the differences between the various functional roles.

The LIWC analysis performed in the current study revealed some particularly compelling changes in language across the life of this group, such as the increase in the use of first person plural pronouns and the increase in exclusionary language across the life of the group. Further research in the connections between exclusionary language and instances of insight might support Agazarian's contention that making discriminations between emotions (which could be construed as an exclusionary process) can lead to a greater insight into human experience and increase a person's ability to tolerate and appropriately respond to intense emotional experiences (Agazarian, 1997). Likewise, linking the use of social language in a group to that group's perceptions of cohesion and the level of benefit or satisfaction derived from the group process may lead researchers to new insights about how connections are established in groups and how members benefit from those connections.

One of the most exciting findings in this study concerns competition as a defense in professional training contexts. Participants in this group identified many harmful effects of competition on participating in and learning through experiential groups. The effects of competition on learning processes have been studied in education research for many years. Most recently, studies have focused upon the role of peer interaction on the collaborative learning process (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002). Collaborative learning is described as a situation in which "all members of the group work on the same aspect of the problem at the same time, sharing cognitive responsibility for the task at hand" and "group members are encouraged to share their thinking as they work together" (Palincsar, 2002, p. 26). This definition of collaborative learning resembles the learning context of an SCT subgroup.

Collaborative learning, according to Rogoff, Matusov, and White (1996) (as cited in Palincsar and Herrenkohl (2002)), is supported by members' commitment to developing a shared understanding as well as a willingness to assist one another. Learning ultimately

becomes the co-creation of a social world (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002) in which group members share responsibility for the course and success of the learning process. In the classroom context, students developing this shared social world often start out being very dependent upon the leader for procedural guidance. Over time, they become increasingly focused upon meaning making, and become flexible in their adherence to strategies designed to scaffold the learning process (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002). A similar process likely occurs in a training group. Certainly, as the AIG evolved across the three years of this study, members became less dependent upon the leader for procedural guidance and more focused upon experimenting with different behaviors and creating shared meaning.

A major difference between the educational contexts in which collaborative learning occurs and the SCT group is that in educational settings, the topic for study is something outside of the students – a scientific process, a history lesson, etc. Within the SCT group, of course, the topic is internal to the members, and yet clear correlations exist between the processes in these two environments. A requirement of success in the classroom context is that the students share an attitude of respect for one another. Whether they agreed or not, students most benefited from collaborative learning when they placed a great deal of importance on the contributions of others. The instantiation of this value occurred when students learned to differentiate between challenging individuals vs. challenging their ideas (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002). This differentiation in the classroom may have prevented one-up / one-down relationships from developing and interfering with the learning process.

When members perceive that they are subject to one-up / one-down relationships, they are likely to engage in a variety of defensive behaviors. The defenses in which members engage as are markers of the phase of development that the group is experiencing (Agazarian & Gantt, 2000). In this study, I analyzed the session contents in order to

identify the main defenses used. As stated in the results section, this analysis revealed that the group did experience the phases of development as presented in Agazarian's model, although the stages occurred in a somewhat different sequence. Further research into how different types of groups, at different levels of sophistication, experience or differ from the models of group development might increase our understanding of both the defenses used in group settings and what exactly the members are defending against. The methods used in this study are far too cumbersome to recommend, but do have the advantage of looking directly at the defenses as indicators of development. Development of a method for coding defenses would certainly ease the researcher's burden if further investigation of the phases of development were of interest.

I was able to identify the objects of the members' observing systems through an analysis of the transcripts in this study. It is logical to predict a strong connection between using the observing system in service of the group-as-a-whole and fulfilling the functional roles of member and leader. Articulating what "in service of the group-as-a-whole" means may be an important aspect of understanding what differentiates a young group from a more mature, task-oriented group. Further studies of the objects of group observation might lead to a greater understanding of the behavioral changes that occur as members shift from person-role to member-role to peer-leader role.

## GLOSSARY

**Attunement:** Attunement refers to awareness of the totality of ones' own experience while also experiencing a psychobiological resonance or empathetic connection with others.

**Authority Issue:** Member is referring to the authority issue, e.g., addressing the psychological needs, habits of thinking, and emotional responses that influence how humans (1) externalize power,(2) establish relationships based upon differences in power, and(3) internalize a sense of personal authority.

**Authority Issue, taking the group through:** Taking the group through the authority issue refers to the idea that every group goes through the phases of development. Part of the development is a process wherein members have to deal with other peoples' hatred of authority, feelings of dependency, and fear of dependence upon an imperfect leader. When going through the authority issue, members often target the group leader with anger, hostility, and sadistic fantasies. An untrained leader is likely to respond to the members' hostility, criticism, and rage with feelings of defensiveness. A competent group leader must be able to understand and respond in a way that enables the group to work through this phase of development without damaging the mental and emotional health of the leader or the members.

**Cognitive Distortion Defense:** A cognitive distortion is a type of defense; the way that the member perceives or interprets events is distorted by the assumptions he or she makes.

**Compliance:** Compliance is considered a defense used to ward off recognition of dissatisfaction or anger.

**Construction:** A construction is a series of assumptions about something that shapes or influences the ways people think about it.

**Data:** Data refers to information held by individuals in a group that, if verbalized in the group context, can further the work of the group in accomplishing the stated task.

**Defense:** A defense is a set of assumptions, enacted through relationships or social behaviors, used to maintain familiar perceptions of reality. People use defenses to reduce anxiety or avoid expected pain. Undoing a defense refers to the process of recognizing a defense, finding out why the person is using it, identifying the costs and benefits of enacting it, and finding alternative ways of thinking and acting.

**Depression Defense:** Depression is viewed as a defense by which the member expends energy in thinking about or criticizing him or her self rather than making contributions to the group.

**Distraction:** A distraction is said to exist when something is keeping a member from having full attention and awareness in the group.

**Distraction, Undoing a:** Undoing a distraction, or performing a distraction exercise, is a process involving two members or a member and a leader. The person helping a distracted member assists that member in resolving the distraction so he or she can be attentive to group processes. SCT theory provides a specific method for undoing distractions.

**Doing Bodies:** “Doing bodies” refers to an SCT process wherein a person increases his or her awareness of physical or apprehensive reactions. This allows the person to access more readily his or her gut reactions and emotions before they are modified or distorted by social conventions, belief systems, or training. Members then bring this information into a subgroup through a join, which allows the person to develop a highly nuanced understanding of his or her spontaneous reactions.

**Explanation Defense:** Explanation is thought of in SCT as a cognitive defense that leads members to put their energy and attention into mental activities that take them away from their here-and-now emotional experience.

**Forcefield:** Forcefield is a written document generated by members or by the group that outlines the reasons why a person might and might not want to accomplish a task. Driving forces are those that motivate a person to accomplish a goal and restraining forces are those that motivate a person not to put their energy into accomplishing the task. Theory holds that decreasing the restraining forces is more effective in promoting task accomplishment than increasing the driving forces (Agazarian, 1997).

**Free, Being:** Being free or freer refers to the idea that the defensive behaviors often acted out by people in a group limit the ways in which they can change and grow. This is because they are vested in maintaining the familiarity of the defense rather than using their attention and energy to take risks, grow, and change.

**Group-as-a-Whole (GAW):** Group-as-a-whole refers to the idea that the group is an identifiable organism with its own dynamics. The dynamics present in a group are thought to dominate any individual’s characteristics; members act differently in a group than they would by themselves. Further, the leader’s task is to maintain an awareness of



the dynamics of the group-as-a-whole as the primary target for intervention. Due to the isomorphic nature of members, subgroups, and the group-as-a-whole, any change in one level in the hierarchy will result in changes in the other levels. Intervening at the level of the group-as-a-whole helps maintain a working alliance with all members of the group and prevents any member from being isolated and targeted by the leader.

**Holding:** Sometimes the term, “holding” refers to maintaining awareness of an affective experience while waiting for other members to find it in themselves and establish a connection with the holding member.

**Holding (2):** Hold can also be used to refer to the idea that any one member in the group can be expressing for the group a particular emotion that other members feel but do not want to express.

**Interpretation:** Interpretation is a type of cognitive defense in which the person speculates about another’s unconscious motivations. The speculations can be quite elaborate and long-lived, effectively moving the person away from his or her here-and-now experience.

**Join:** A join occurs when a member establishes an empathetic connection, based upon a shared experience, with other members in the group. In this instance, “not a join” indicates that this member is not sure her feelings are similar enough to establish an empathetic connection.

**Leader Role:** The leader role refers to maintaining an awareness of the group-as-a-whole dynamics, managing the boundaries between person, subgroups, and the group-as-a-whole, and helping members bring their attention, energy, and information in a way that is helpful for the group.

**Licensing Group:** when members complete all training requirements and decide to seek licensure, they must participate in a licensing group. Within the licensing group context, members often give one another feedback on their skills as an SCT therapist.

**Member System:** The member system occurs when a person in a group is able to maintain a metacognitive awareness of his or her internal state while attending to the work of the group or subgroup.

**Narcissistic Leadership:** Narcissistic leadership refers to times when the leader’s interventions in the group are motivated by satisfying personal needs rather than working for the benefit of the group-as-a-whole or its members.

**One-down Role:** One-down is taking an inferior stance relative to another person. It usually involves disowning one's authority or ability to think or react intelligently to the stimuli that provokes the behavior. Taking a one-down stance is a defensive behavior.

**One-up Role:** One-up is taking a superior stance or enacting a superior role in which the other person's thoughts or feelings are discounted. Taking a one-up role is a defensive behavior.

**Pairing:** Pairing within a group is a type of defensive behavior. It occurs when two people engage in mutually reinforcing and stereotypical social roles. The roles tend to heighten the importance of the relationship above other relationships, and the goal of maintaining the paired relationship supersedes group goals.

**Person System:** A person system occurs when a person is aware of his or her feelings, but is not acting for the benefit of a group or subgroup. A person acting out of a person system is often engaged in defensive behaviors.

**Regression:** Regression is a defense in which a person adopts a one-down or submissive stance, and expresses various behaviors that stall progress toward a goal. Unreasonable stubbornness, hostility, and assuming a victim role are common behaviors associated with the regression defense. "Holding the regression" refers to the idea that one person in a group is symbolically acting out a regression for the rest of the group members. The other members of the group gain the benefit of the regression (stalling change) without taking responsibility for the behavior.

**Resource:** Resource refers to the idea that each member and the leader hold information that is important to the group if it is to accomplish its task.

**Subgroup, Subgrouping:** Subgroup refers to a group within the group-as-a-whole, established through a similarity of feelings, maintained through eye contact, and deepened through identifying and verbalizing greater and greater detail about the shared experience. Subgrouping, the verb, refers to enacting all of the behaviors required to establish and maintain a subgroup.

**A systems-centered role** contains the behaviors that reflect an awareness of the set of relationships extent in the group context. For example, the person in a system-centered role would be aware of his or her feelings and the ways in which these feelings are connected to the group dynamics. The contributions made by a member acting from a systems-centered role will be useful for the subgroup or group.

**Thought Defense:** A thought (thinking) refers to the defense of intellectualization or evading the work in the group or one's own emotions by retreating into non-productive thinking. This process diverts the member's attention away from the here-and-now process in the group.

**Transferred State:** A member is in "transferred state" when he or she responds to his or her environment according to assumptions rather than the current context.

**Undoing a Defense:** Undoing a defense refers to the process of recognizing a defense, finding out why the person is using it, identifying the costs and benefits of enacting it, and finding alternative ways of thinking and acting.

**Victim Role Defense:** The victim role is a stereotypical social defense, usually expressed in the early stages of group development. The person in victim role assumes a helpless and wounded attitude that prevents him or her from accepting responsibility for circumstances, behaviors, and events.

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