

Group Therapy with Adolescents¹

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It is quite common for the Adlerian practitioner who is working with an adolescent to find an authoritarian parent or two in the picture. Indeed, personal experience indicates that in the great majority of cases involving a misbehaving adolescent at least one parent is using authoritarian techniques. If the parent(s) had previously pampered their youngster, they have become alarmed at their lack of influence with the child and have decided to clamp down. If they were originally authoritarian in their approach, they have found that a little force did not work and have decided that what is needed is a little more force. In either case, it is likely that a power struggle is ensuing. It may be possible to disarm the power struggle through traditional Adlerian family counseling procedures, and that is surely helpful; family counseling and parent education, however, are not likely to supply the adolescent with a comprehensive understanding of the private logic that he uses in coping with the tasks of life. To say that the adolescent's goal is to demonstrate his power (as it so frequently is when he interacts with his parents) does not do justice to the variety of behavior that he exhibits away from his parents. The consistency of this varied behavior can be understood properly through a life style assessment, helping the adolescent to discover the use he makes of the conclusions he has drawn about himself, others, and life in general. The group approach suggested in this paper is an efficient method of helping adolescents to discover the contribution they make to their own successes and difficulties; further, this group approach takes advantage of (1) the potentially powerful source of encouragement that is provided by the peer group, and (2) the uniquely encouraging experience of discovering that all of us are wrestling with quite similar concerns.

A Guide to Self Assessment

The structure for the operation of the group is provided by a slightly modified version of "A Guide To Self Assessment." The guide was developed by Robert L. Powers in a successful effort to adapt to adult group therapy the life style assessment techniques popularized by Individual Psychologists. Bob Powers has used the guide extensively with adults in group therapy, and he and I have used the approach successfully while co-leading intensive, short-term adult groups. It has not been published before. This slightly modified version of the guide is presented here with Power's permission.

¹*Demonstrated at the Fall, 1974, Semi-Annual Meeting of ASAP in a day-long workshop. (Editor's notation)*

Ideally, eight adolescents participate in the group. If listed time limits are strictly maintained, members of the group can obtain considerable help from one another in two eight-hour sessions. When it is not practical to get participants together for such extended periods of time, the group can proceed by meeting once or twice a week for several hours, still using the same format. Having used both approaches to scheduling sessions with adolescents, I have found the intensive two-day session to be more productive.

A brief exercise is useful at the start of the first session; the exercise should be designed to help members of the group become at ease and to acquaint them at least superficially with one another. Subsequently, the following guide is used to structure the group experience.

Part I: A Guide for Presenting Yourself to The Seminar

- A. You have ten minutes, uninterrupted, in which to tell us who you are.
- B. Stay, as much as possible, in the *present tense*. Later on you will have an opportunity to tell us about your childhood.
- C. Life challenges each of us, and each person is now approaching its challenges in a way unique to himself. Tell us about your responses to these challenges:
 1. What kind of friends have you made? What kind of friend are you? How do you get along with strangers in chance meetings? How do people treat you generally? How do you feel about other people, most of the time?
 2. What kind of work do you do? What kind of worker are you? Do you enjoy what you are doing? Do those with whom or for whom you work appreciate your contributions?
 3. Whom do you love? What kinds of problems have you had over loving and being loved? Does sex, closeness, and intimacy have a comfortable place in your life or not? What does masculinity mean to you? What does femininity mean to you? How do you measure up to whatever you expect of yourself as a man or a woman?

Part II: A Guide for Sharing in Responses

- A. Someone has just spent ten minutes presenting himself. How did you receive what he presented?
- B. Did you *recognize* things in yourself that he mentioned about himself? Was it easy to understand him or difficult? Did he sound strange or familiar?
- C. How do you *feel* toward him? Did your feelings toward him change as a result of his presenting himself as he did? How?

- D. Do you feel invited to *act* any particular way toward him? Did you welcome that invitation or resent it? What would you like to do *for* this person? What would you like to do *with* this person? What would you like to do *to* this person?

Part III: A Guide for Drawing Your Family Constellation

- A. In childhood each of us learned how to define the *place* he had amongst others. Help the members of the seminar to see the kind of place you had as a pre-adolescent child in your family.
- B. How many children were there in your family, and where did you fit in amongst them? How were you different from the others, and how were you alike them? Which of the others was most nearly like you, and which was most different? What were you “good at”? What was hard for you?
- C. What was father like? Who was his favorite? What did he expect from you? How did you feel about his expectations?
- D. What was mother like? Who was her favorite? What did she expect from you? How did you feel about her expectations?
- E. How did your parents get along with each other? What were their differences/arguments/fights about? To which parent did you feel closer? Why?
- F. Were grandparents or other relatives important to you? How?
- G. Did anything change at adolescence? How? What did puberty, physical development, and dating mean to you?
 1. For boys: What did “being a man” mean to you? Did you think you would have been happier, luckier, better off if you had been born a girl?
 2. For girls: What did “being a woman” mean to you? Did you think you would have been happier, luckier, better off if you had been born a boy?

Part IV: A Guide for Discussing a Family Constellation

- A. Can you share any feelings about yourself in your family with the person who just told you about his childhood?
- B. Can you understand this person better? How?
- C. Can you see something in the way he presented himself initially which didn’t make sense to you at the time?
- D. What more do you want to know about this person?

- E. Can you see a relationship between the *role* he played as a child, in his family and among other children, and the way in which he has tried to find a place in this *seminar*?
- F. Each of us has, as a *private goal*, the ability to play a certain kind of *social role*.

Parts I and II are repeated for each member of the group before the group moves on to Parts III and IV, which are again repeated for each member of the group. A fifth and sixth part can be added at the option of the leader. Part V would consist of obtaining two or three early memories, while Part VI would be devoted to the interpretation of the memories by the leader and participants. These additional segments are limited to ten minutes each in the fashion of Parts I through IV.

A group may terminate at the conclusion of Part IV or Part VI, or it may continue to meet periodically in order to help group members work at relating the increased awareness of the purposes and patterns of their behavior to the challenges of social living.