

Object Relations Theory: Attachment and Belonging

PSGPN Conference: March, 2012

J. Scott Rutan, Ph.D.

Many of us who have been doing group therapy for a long time were originally trained in some form of conflict theory. The assumption was that various aspects of self were in conflict, and a technical implication was that we looked for conflict in our groups as a window into the inner lives of our group members. Anger was good! Tears were even better! But the value was thought to be in getting closer to the internal conflict through studying externalized aggression, not necessarily in growing closer to each other.

This was a useful and often quite powerful way to approach group therapy. But over time it became apparent that there was much more than externalized anger and aggression involved in conflict. Indeed, perhaps even *more* pervasive, especially in the modern Western world, is conflict about intimacy, attachment, relationship and closeness.

As Object Relations Theory redefined the basic foundation of personality – as inescapably and inherently an object-seeking phenomenon – we began to view conflicted interactions quite differently. If we begin with the hypothesis that all our group members are, at all times, trying their best to be *in* relationships, not out of them, some fascinating theoretical and technical consequences follow. Angry exchanges are now seen not as attempts to drive others away, but rather as defensive reactions to intimacy. Indeed, in some families anger and squabbling *is* the best attempt at intimacy.

Example: Bill, a narcissistic businessman, has a habit of arriving 5 or 10 minutes late for each meeting. Occasionally he gives an excuse (“traffic”; “business meeting”; and the like) but often he just arrives, rather noisily, and takes his seat. Sometimes he will ask, “What have I missed?”

There are many options for to dealing with this behavior. Certainly one could mine the group for the *anger* such behavior invites. In a recent meeting Laura yelled at Bill, “You are insufferable. You discount us and this group and you walk in here like you are much more important than anyone else!” There were many nodding heads, signaling agreement and this thread could have been pursued.

Or, one could focus on the *meaning* of the lateness – is Bill trying for the grand entrance? Is he demonstrating pervasive passive-aggressive behavior? Is he frightened about meeting the members a bit early and having to engage in ‘small talk’? Is he making certain group topics will have already begun when he enters, lest he find himself with an opportunity to talk himself? There are many possible explanations for this persistent behavior.

An attachment theory focus would lead me to take a different tact. I might well inquire of Bill, “So what do you feel when you hear so powerfully that people *want* you here?” Clearly, the

most damning response of the group would have been to imply that they really didn't care if Bill came late...or at all!

Using this approach has highlighted another, quite powerful healing factor that occurs in our groups – the experience of *belonging*. It does not occur in all groups and it does not occur automatically, nor is belonging the only type of experience that occurs. One can be “in” a group, or a club or family or team, without feeling that one “belongs” there. Belonging is a far deeper and more pervasive type of relationship than simple membership.

But when one *does* experience a feeling of belonging, it can have a powerful effect. Belonging to a group offers a type of relationship that can be healing and/or enhancing. This may be explained in part by what Winnicott (1960) termed the “holding environment” and Bion (1961) called “containment” and Yalom (1975) referred to as “cohesion” (which he says includes a sense of belonging and being accepted).

Belonging is not always benign. The search for belonging can also have negative effects. A desire to belong has led people to join the Ku Klux Klan, cults, urban street gangs, and various hate groups. The need to belong can triumph over individual responsibility and morality. Therefore it is imperative that we attend to factors that lead to *healthy* belonging in our therapy groups. I have become convinced that working on the basis of Object Relations and Attachment theories enhances healthy *belonging* in our groups.

There are specific techniques that can enhance a positive sense of belonging for our group members. These techniques include:

- Focus on *attachment* rather than *detachment*. Begin with the assumption that individuals are doing the best they can to be *in* relationship, not *out* of relationship.
- Pay attention to the group agreements. “If individual members are the bricks that make a group, the group agreements are the mortar that binds those parts into a therapeutic whole.” (Rutan et al, 2007, p. 154)
- The agreements are fundamental to setting good group *boundaries*, and Scharff & Scharff (1987) have pointed out that good boundaries are necessary to establish a healthy holding environment.

There are also steps to be taken to reduce the risk of harmful belonging in our groups. These would include:

- Be alert to potential sub-grouping, narcissistic injury and attempts to scapegoat. While often painful, these events are inevitable in groups and do offer an opportunity for learning. If addressed, a sense of belonging can occur after working through these issues, but one should always note and explore these events as they occur so that all group members have an opportunity to experience this sense of belonging.

References

- Bion, WR (1961). *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*. New York: Routledge.
- Rutan, JS, Stone, WN, & Shay, JJ (2007). *Psychodynamic Group Psychotherapy* (4th Ed). New York: Guilford.
- Scharff, D.& Scharff, J.(1987) *Object Relations Family Therapy*., Northvale, N.J. Jason Aronson.
- Yalom, ID (1975) *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (2nd Ed.), New York: Basic Books, pp. 3-103.
- Winnicott, D. (1960). The theory of the parent-child relationship., *Int. J. Psychoanal.*, 41:585-595.