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GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH UNDERACHIEVERS

A Term Paper

Presented to

Dr. Weldon E. Vogt

Ouachita Baptist University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for Honors

Special Studies H291 in Psychology

by

Marty McDonald

January 1968

## OUTLINE

### I. DEFINITION OF TERMS

- A. Group Psychotherapy
  - 1. History
  - 2. Processes
- B. Underachievers
  - 1. Causes
  - 2. Characteristics

### II. APPROACHES

- A. Public Schools
- B. Colleges
- C. Modern Techniques

### III. FUTURE PLANS FOR OUACHITA

- A. Setting Up a Group
  - 1. Selection of group members
  - 2. Physical setting for group
- B. Goals
  - 1. Determine problems
  - 2. Solve problems

This paper is a fulfillment for Honors Special Studies H291 in Psychology. The majority of the research is from library study, although some of the information came from personal interviews. The aim of this paper is to point out the opportunities and possibilities of group psychology in helping underachievers particularly at the college level. Due to a lack of available information on this topic, it was necessary first to examine group psychotherapy and underachievers separately and then to try correlating the two areas.

In a junior high school of an Eastern state two boys were sent to the guidance counselor. Both were classed as underachievers, and capable of work far superior to their present work. After counseling, one boy was advanced an entire grade to more challenging material. He accepted this new load and his interests revived, as well as his quality of work. The other boy was counseled extensively, for demanding emotional problems were blocking his capabilities.<sup>1</sup> These are just two of the many ways in which underachieving students are dealt. We would like to study group psychotherapy as a possible means. However, we realize as Dr. Raymond A. Patouillet of Columbia University's Teachers College does, "No one has yet devised a means for measuring a child's potential or ultimate capacity."<sup>2</sup>

Some have said there is no easy, pat definition for group psychotherapy; that it is therapy given to two or more persons at the same time.<sup>3</sup> Group psychotherapy is an unceasing progress--it can not stand

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<sup>1</sup>"Helping Students Who Should Do Better," Good Housekeeping, CLXII (March, 1966), p. 184.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup>Abraham S. Luchins, Group Therapy, A Guide (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 11.

still for a definition! Others have said it is a means of treating people in a group.<sup>4</sup> S. R. Slavson has defined it as "... treatment in which no discussion is initiated by the therapist; interpretation is given only in very rare instances and under specific conditions."<sup>5</sup> Group psychotherapy, as its name implies, is closely related to psychiatry and sociology.

Group psychotherapy is truly an American innovation. It had a "false dawn" in 1905 when a Boston internist, Dr. Joseph Hersey Pratt, began a class for his tubercular patients.<sup>6</sup> Its early beginnings were strongly influenced by pragmatist and empirical movements. Dr. Pratt got financial support from Dr. Elwood Worcester, a Boston rector, in the sum of five hundred dollars.<sup>7</sup> He had twenty five patients enrolled with usually fifteen to twenty at each session. He reported fine spirits and pleasant atmosphere in these weekly meetings, very unlike the normal downcast outlook the patients took. Pratt was slow to realize the full impact of his beginnings. However, he has been referred

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<sup>4</sup>J. L. Moreno, M. D. (ed.), The International Handbook of Group Psychotherapy (New York: Philosophical Library, 1966), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup>S. R. Slavson, An Introduction to Group Therapy (New York: The Commonwealth Fund, 1943), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Hugh Mullan and Max Rosenbaum, Group Psychotherapy - Theory and Practice (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, a Division of The Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, p. 3.

to as the father of the repressive--inspirational movement in group psychotherapy.<sup>8</sup> Another outstanding contributor to group psychotherapy is Jacob L. Moreno, also called the father of this movement.<sup>9</sup> He began his work with a prison study in 1931.<sup>10</sup> Years prior to this he had been active in group therapy in Vienna and possibly there coined the word "psychotherapy."<sup>11</sup> He continues to do leading work in this field, publishing or editing magazines and journals. Other men stand out to us for their contributions: Louis Wender, Paul Schilder, Trigant L. Burrow, Samuel Slavson, and even Carl Rogers. Since the Second World War group psychotherapy has come into prominence. It still does not have the support of all psychologists, however. It has been termed the "Third Psychiatric Revolution" following the unchaining of the mentally ill and Sigmund Freud's movement.<sup>12</sup>

Psychotherapy has two methods; to diagnose and to treat. It hinges on the idea that behind each human act there is a reason, conscious or unconscious.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>Moreno, op. cit., p. 31.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup>Mullan and Rosenbaum, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>"Strength in Numbers," Time, LXXXI (February 8, 1963), p. 38.

One of the best ways to reach an unconscious reason which may cause emotional disturbance is to bring the reason out in the open. Often this is difficult, for the reason may lie deep. The goal of psychotherapy is to find why the disturbance occurred and to prevent a reoccurrence.

Now let us examine underachievers. From the opening statements one has a fairly good concept of underachievement. The Boston school system classifies an underachiever as "One who is functioning below the level of competence that his I. R. would indicate."<sup>13</sup> The I. R. are scores from achievement tests given every two years combined with I. R. test scores themselves. Other educators have categorized under-achievers as students who are intellectually in the upper one-third of their class but who perform at a lower level. It has been estimated that every second pupil is performing below his potential.<sup>14</sup> In an article of the NEA Journal this was the definition given for an underachiever.

What is an under achiever made of? A scorned imagination, an unused memory,

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<sup>13</sup>United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Action for Boston Community Development, Inc. and Experimental Guidance Adviser Program in the Boston Public Schools. EDO01104 (Washington: Office of Education, January 1965), p. 10.

<sup>14</sup>Benjamin Fine, Underachievers, How They Can Be Helped (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1967), p. 10.

tabooed sensations, an interrupted thought, a rejected question, a forbidden daydream, an unexpressed idea, an unsought judgment, an unpainted picture, an unsung song, a safely hidden poem, unused talents... These make an underachiever.<sup>15</sup>

As stated above, intelligence levels are frequently used as determinants for separating over- and under-achievers. By the other definitions given, it is easily seen that this is not always a valid test. Many times teachers suppress a desire or stunt creative growth in a student. L. Carroll King, a professor at Northwestern University, has expressed the feeling that high school teachers are requiring "too much, too fast, too soon and too long."<sup>16</sup> Many times emotional problems, health problems or tension may retard mental activity. Other causes stem from lack of stimulation, inadequate facilities, or too much pushing on the other hand. Some students become so involved in extra-curricular activities they tire out and school assignment suffer. Whether it is social class, school conditions, personality problems, or environment that harms the individual, underachievers have some common characteristics. They dawdle through their work and rationalize to explain their failings.

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<sup>15</sup>E. Paul Torrance, "Who is the Underachiever?", NEA Journal, LI (November, 1962), p. 15.

<sup>16</sup>"Academic Casualties," School and Society, XCV (April 15, 1967), p. 248.

Generally they are more hostile, suspicious and degrading to other persons than an achiever.<sup>17</sup> Usually underachievers come from lower class, culturally deprived homes, which could explain the selfish, me-first attitude. Yet most of these young people are active socially and seem to enjoy the company of their classmates. Dr. Benjamin Fine has suggested that this is a result of mixing fact and fantasy. It has been found among people with average and above intelligence one-half of the men and one-fourth of the women are underachievers.<sup>18</sup> Males show underachieving tendencies in the early years of school; females show these tendencies in the junior high years. Everyone of us has basic needs which must be met and when they are not, anxiety and concern invade the mind. To an extent, we are all underachievers, but the severely underachieving students, beginning through college, deserve careful attention.

As early as the fourth grade, some schools are applying group psychotherapy with underachievers. In one particular school, counselors met for fourteen weeks in half-hour sessions, one or two times a week. The fourth graders were urged to talk of their problems

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<sup>17</sup>Fine, op. cit., p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid, p. 20.

and seek understanding. The counselors used a client centered approach with much role playing and play therapy in addition.<sup>19</sup> One authority suggests that less pressure on the children may avert unnecessary underachieving.<sup>20</sup> Many elementary schools now place students in groups according to their abilities. This is a common practice in high schools particularly in English and social studies classes. Educators feel this grouping will induce motivation. In 1928, when group psychotherapy was very young, the junior high school students of Boston with problems met in weekly guidance sessions in their local schools.<sup>21</sup> Other schools are employing group methods for dealing with underachievers too. At Sequoia Union High School, Sequoia, California, two groups were set up for underachievers. All the students involved were gifted intellectually, scoring seventy-five per cent or above on aptitude tests, yet were working below their ability level. The students were divided into experiment and control groups. The control group met only for counseling as needed. The experiment group

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<sup>19</sup>United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Counseling and Guidance of Underachieving Fourth Grade Students. EDO01847 (Washington: Office of Education, 1964), p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>Jane W. Kessler, "My Son, the Underachiever", PTA Magazine, LVII (June, 1963), p. 14.

<sup>21</sup>Action for Boston Community Development, op. cit., p. 2.

was counseled weekly for two years, in eight same sexed groups. Several methods of testing, evaluations and personal records were compiled on both groups during these two years. Comparison showed the experiment group were better students; they paid attention more, were less disturbing, more willing to learn and absent less than previously. The control group had grown weaker in their weak points and had gained significantly only in self-acceptance. The experimental group was further evaluated as having more "capacity for status, sociability, social presence, sense of well being, tolerance, achievement via performance, achievement via independence, social poise and adequacy and capacity for independent thought and action."<sup>22</sup> In Wellesley, Massachusetts, a program of group psychotherapy was developed as a result of a rash increase of suicide attempts. The Dean of Women at the high school and an outside psychologist met with small groups which included underachievers. Actually the Dean and the psychologist did not consider the program as psychoanalytic group therapy. The student were allowed to "talk it out" and results have indicated the student are doing better grade wise.

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<sup>22</sup> United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Group Counseling for Gifted Under-achieving High School Students in Sequoia High School District. ED001841 (Washington: Office of Education, 1965), p. 4.

The work of group psychotherapy with underachieving college students has yielded some interesting observations. A study in 1960 by Lum demonstrated college females who were underachieving were less self-confident and had less motivation. He attributed the difference in achievements to amount of academic drive.<sup>23</sup> Todd, Terrell, and Frank found underachievers did not expect to do as well in their college courses as achievers expected to do.<sup>24</sup> Studies by Shaw and Brown and Shaw and Grubb pointed out more hostility was found among underachievers.<sup>25</sup> In Drake's work of 1962, underachieving college freshmen scored high in psychopathic-deviate and manic depressive scales on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.<sup>26</sup> However, Baymur and Paterson did not consider group psychotherapy effective in working with underachievers. There are several opinions and convictions on the effectiveness of group counseling with underachievers.

Several unique methods are being used with both underachievement and group psychotherapy. Dr. Peter Hogan and Dr. Ian Alger have found closed

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<sup>23</sup>Counseling and Guidance of Underachieving Fourth Grade Students, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, p. 11.

circuit television very effective in their group psychotherapy sessions.<sup>27</sup> The first fifteen minutes of the session is taped, then replayed. The group members are capable of seeing actions, expressions, and phrases which aroused certain emotions. Many patients are shocked by their actions, though the replay helps them to see a new angle of themselves. This is just one of various new methods in therapy counseling. For some time therapists have strictly adhered to a "hands off" policy in dealing with patients. Now therapists are pushing, shouting, or holding patients when they feel the actions would be advantageous in a session. Dr. Hogan and Dr. Alger have on occasion removed all chairs from the therapy room, thus causing the patients to sit on the floor. It was hopeful this would prevent fixed attitudes which tend to result from fixed positions. Although all psychotherapists do not agree on use of these new methods, they are aware of the opening doors the gadgets are supplying. Among public schools particularly concerned for underachievers, a novel approach is being tried. In North Carolina and Pennsylvania, teachers are using games to help motivate students.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>"Playback...New Aid in the Ordeal of Self-discovery", Look, XXXI (January 24, 1967), p. 26.

<sup>28</sup>Dale C. Farran, "Games Work with Underachievers", Senior Scholastic, XCI (November 9, 1967), p. 10.

These educational games or "simulations" are available for such courses as sociology, urban studies, even political science. The games have been effective in teaching students to make decisions and plan ahead. One game of interest especially for poor planners is the 'Life Career Game'. The participants must manipulate a "profile" in difficult situations similar to real situations. By working in groups of three or four to a game, the students may profit from each other.

Here, at Ouachita, the possibilities for group psychotherapy with college underachievers are encouraging. It is helpful to study how such a group could be set up. One authority feels that it is difficult to establish an effective group therapy program in an institution such as a college. He expressed it as, "Generally speaking, the more authoritarian the institution, the easier to form the therapy group, but also the less chance for intensive group psychotherapy."<sup>29</sup> One therapist found that an open group-allowing members freedom to come and go-of both sexes from similar backgrounds worked very well among college students.<sup>30</sup> Usually

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<sup>29</sup>Mullan and Rosenbaum, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>30</sup>Moreno, op. cit., p. 619.

groups can be handled smoother when limited to five or six participants. It is mandatory that the students be consulted in private interviews before entering the group. In this way, the therapist can assure partial success by eliminating persons who could be detrimental to the group. The therapist must consider the type of therapy to be presented, the problems to be faced, the institutional needs, and the time and place for group meetings.<sup>31</sup> Members can be selected by testing, evaluating, and intensity of problems. Particularly of interest to our case would be results of test administered. Good indicators are the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, Kuder Preference Record, Otis Self-Administering Tests of Mental Ability, Iowa Content Examination, or the Adjustment Inventory. Also to be considered are the students' grades and teacher evaluations. There is not a set guide for determining who should or should not participate, but each group will have two or three students as a foci or nucleus. Some will be instigators, neutralizers, isolates, and scape-goats.<sup>32</sup> The group's psychotherapy sessions should be conducted in a set place at a set time. It is

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<sup>31</sup>Luchins, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>32</sup>Slavson, op. cit., p. 119.

best for the chairs to be arranged in a circle to allow for freer discussions. The room should be nicely furnished and comfortable, but not distracting. Abraham Luchins suggests that college groups are best suited to meet in classrooms and counselor's offices.<sup>33</sup>

In our efforts at Ouachita the goal will be the same as others have stated, "behavioral rehabilitation"; progress comes with a desired change in a person's behavior.<sup>34</sup> The atmosphere should provide love and understanding, free expression, tolerance for a venerable and trustworthy, trained therapist.<sup>35</sup> It is essential that the problem of underachievement be defined since it must be combated at every angle. In group counseling with underachievers in Boston Public schools, topics were discussed which would benefit the student academically. These included how to study notes, write reports, plan homework, prepare for tests, and make the best use of time.<sup>36</sup> Also outlined were community activities, vocations,

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<sup>33</sup>Luchins, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, p. 116.

<sup>35</sup>Samuel B. Hadden, "A Way Out for Homosexuals", Harper, CCXXXIV (March, 1967), p. 116.

<sup>36</sup>Action for Boston Community Development, op. cit., p. 42.

neighborhood problems and culture differences.

It is difficult to directly apply previous attempts of group psychotherapy with underachievers to our situation. The attitudes and techniques used by another group may or may not prove useful to us. We must find the methods best suited for our specific circumstances. In the proposed group setting for Ouachita we hope to help the underachievers in a way that will not only strengthen academic progress but also lessen personal and emotional problems.

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