Groupwork Theory

Theoretically we may look at groups from many different perspectives which are conceptually distinct. These perspectives can each add a different dimension to our understanding. What follows is a very brief summary of some of the different perspectives which have developed about groups.

Structural Approach

If we envisage the group as a structure we are likely to ask such questions as:

What are the patterns of relationships which exist between the members of this group?

What sub-groupings exist and how are they related?

What tele (paradigm) is operating?

Are there stars/isolates, are there factors in the way the group has been set up or structured by the leaders which are constraining members' behaviour?

We might find some help in thinking about these questions in sociometry or in systems theory.

Roles

Or we might think about the group in terms of roles.

Then we might ask what is the division of roles in the group?

We would he interested in issues of function, expectation and inter-dependency. This sort of approach might, for instance, he used in team building to look at how different people can each make contributions which may complement one another. Some useful theoretical material might he found in role theory, systems theory, and sociology.

Process and stages

Or we might think of a group as a developing process.

We might then ask what stage of development has this group reached?

What is the overall lifespan of this group and how is its age affecting its functioning?

How did the present characteristics of the group evolve out of the previous stages and how do they pave the way for future developments?

Tuckman and Lungren's ideas about group stages might help us.

Preoccupation

Or we might think about what is consciously or unconsciously preoccupying this group.

Is it behaving as if certain assumptions held?

Are issues like safety or inclusion or power or rules affecting what is being talked about in ways that are unrecognised by the group members themselves?

Are such issues affecting the choice of language or symbolism or metaphors employed? For instance, if a member of the group is holding everybody's attention at length with a description of a film he saw about a family break up, is this because the group members sense a threat to the integrity of the group itself which they cannot face discussing openly.

T-group theory might help us with some of these issues.

Norms

Or we might think about the group norms.

> *We might ask what rules seem to be operating and how were these established?*
>
> *Who would have the power to change them?*
>
> *How are they evolving?*
>
> *What are they seemingly designed to achieve?*

Task

Or we might think about the group, in terms of its implicit or explicit task.

> *Is this a group in which there is a preset agenda or not?*
>
> *Is this a group in which one person holds the floor or "works" for a time and then another takes over or is it one in which the members all interact fluidly and continuously?*
>
> *Is this group concerned with here and now issues or with there and then ones?*
>
> *Is there a shared sense of purpose?*

Dynamics

Or we might think about the group in terms of its psychodynamics.

> *Then we would ask: What sentiments and motives lie behind the behaviour of the group members?*
>
> *In what way are processes of rivalry, jealousy, identification, differentiation, power seeking, projection, dependency, transference, etc. affecting the individuals in this group?*
>
> *How can the group be understood on the analogy of a family?*

Psychoanalytic theory might help.

Functional Approach

Or we might look at the interactions between group members functionally.

> *How do these interactions relate to the task of the group?*
>
> *Are they functional or dysfunctional?*

Some sociological theory such as Bales Interaction Analysis might help.

Interactions

Or we might look at the interactions qualitatively.

> *Are emotions expressed?*
>
> *Are thoughts expressed?*