

Managing Psychological Depth

Ringer and Gillis (1995) developed a model which attempts to present some general principles for group leaders to manage psychological levels in groups for which they are responsible. Through considering the language of participant conversation, a group leader can assess the psychological depth of the dialogue in relation to a model which proposes eight levels of psychological depth. This suggested assessment of psychological depth is based on four criteria which focus on what the speaker is saying.

1. In what way is the speaker involved in the topic under discussion?
2. What is the nature of the relationships embedded in the participant's conversation i.e. who else is involved?
3. What would be the normal bounds of confidentiality and privacy for the topic under discussion?
4. How much potential emotional arousal exists in what the speaker is saying?

The use of these criteria should enable the group leader to assess psychological depth in relation to the eight levels increasing in depth from 'surface' to 'universal'. The levels are briefly summarised below.

Surface:	Group members are talking in general terms about other people and are disclosing little about themselves. Emotional responses are kept hidden and interactions may resemble those at a social function where people are trying to keep their distance.
Personally experienced:	Participants are acting from their own experience of themselves or others in a particular social role, occupational classification or position in society. Descriptions of personal experience of current significant relationships or those from early life are considered to be at a deeper level. Hence the focus is on social and professional roles rather than significant relationships.
Current task:	The focus is on events in the group of which they are members at that moment. In DT terms, the conversation is about task and activity issues rather than relationship issues.
Encounter:	Behaviour and interactions between group members are the subject of discussion. Participants may notice and reflect their perception of themselves in relation to the activity or exercise.
Contextual:	The discussion involves relationships with people in the participants' vocational, social and familial world who are not necessarily present in the current group. Discussions that focus the transfer of learning from experiential activities to everyday life are at this level.
Identity formation:	At this level participants are examining and perhaps reshaping their identity and sense of self. Relationships that existed at times when the participant was undergoing critical developmental processes are being discussed. The authors maintain that sustained working and probing at this level

constitutes psychotherapy and should only be done with a contract of informed consent with the group.

Cultural/historical: Group members are identifying with their culture of origin, their cultural heroes, cultural history, their gender, their race or their nationality. This level is concerned with how participants experience themselves as members of cultural groups rather than academic or historical of history or culture.

Universal: Participants deal with the existential issues of life and death; issues of meaning and being.

Should a participant's conversation or disclosure be at a depth beyond a level considered appropriate, it is suggested that the content of the conversation or disclosure could be acknowledged respectfully and then led to a less deep level by the tutor.

Ringer, M" Gillis, H. L. (1995). Managing psychological depth in adventure programming. The Journal of Experiential Education, 18(1),41-51.