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December 2002 Article of the Month

This month's selection is by Joan E. Hemenway, CPE Supervisor and Director of Supervisory Education, Dept. of Religious Ministries, Yale-New Haven Hospital, New Haven, CT. jhemen@worldnet.att.net

McCluskey, Una [University of York, England; um2@york.ac.uk]. "**The dynamics of attachment and systems-centered group psychotherapy.**" *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research and Practice* 6, no. 2 (June 2002): 131-142.

SUMMARY: This article by Una McCluskey is based upon research into empathic attunement in adult psychotherapy, clinical material from a group psychotherapy session, and research in the field of attachment. It serves as an excellent introduction for CPE Supervisors and supervisory education students to systems-centered group work. It also explains with fresh language and psychological originality the attachment dynamics at the center of group process work and our own educational and pastoral practice. The author hopes to spur research into connections between attachment theory, affect attunement, and group psychotherapy.

COMMENT: This is a significant "bridge article" which explores the relationship between attachment theory in object relations and a systems-centered understanding of group process. The article focuses on the nature of empathic relationships and how these are activated through functional subgrouping. It suggests that a person's ability to achieve emotional resonance with another person derives from the affect and tone of the original attachment relationship when the infant's care seeking behaviors are responded to by the mother's care giving behaviors. The inevitable lapses and failures in this earliest relationship lead to defenses that become life-long emotional patterns. The article suggests that a group process that uses the systems-centered method of functional subgrouping provides a suitable context for participants to modify their defenses, thereby enhancing their ability to achieve greater authentic connection with self and others.

The systems-centered group therapy model (SCT®) developed by Yvonne Agazarian is an approach to group work which integrates psychoanalytic, humanistic, cognitive, developmental and systems theories. The focus is on phases of group life (authority, intimacy and work phase) in which participants begin to understand and modify their own defenses as the group moves through various phases and sub-phases. The primary work is done with here-and-now feelings in connection with others in subgroupings that are constantly evolving. The ability to use and increase attunement with others is key to the effectiveness of systems-oriented group work and confirms the importance of McCluskey's research.

For some practitioners in clinical pastoral education this approach to the group process experience may initially appear too psychotherapeutic. For others it may seem too structured and controlling. For still others it may seem hard to understand in its emphasis on the group-as-a-whole process as a prototype of a living human system. Nevertheless, Agazarian's path breaking work is an example of a comprehensive theoretical framework out of which a diversity of methods for doing group work are being developed. Even such basics as establishing time

and space boundaries, working with distractions, undoing anxiety, and activating one's member role are presented in new and imaginative ways.

[Editor's note: McClusky's article is available on-line in full-text and PDF formats through Ovid and is indexed in the PsycINFO on-line database. For more information and follow-up to systems-centered group work, see also **Joan Hemenway's article in the January-February 2003 issue of the ACPE News**. Supervisors interested in discussing the application of SCT® to CPE should contact Joan Hemenway at jhemen@worldnet.att.net.]

Related Items of Interest:

Agazarian, Y. M. *A Systems-Centered Approach to Inpatient Group Psychotherapy*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2001

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Agazarian, Y. M. and Gantt, S. P. *Autobiography of a Theory: Developing the Theory of Living Human Systems and Its Systems-Centered Practice*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2000.

Agazarian, Y. M. and Peters, R. *The Visible and Invisible Group: Two Perspectives on Group Psychotherapy and Group Process*. Boston: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1981.

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E. and Wall, S. *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1978.

Bowlby, J. *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 1*. London: Hogarth Press, 1969.

Bowlby, J. *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 2*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Bowlby, J. *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 3*. New York: Basic Books, 1980.

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Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1971.

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