

2012

# Application of Focal Conflict Theory to Psychoeducational Groups: Implications for Process, Content, and Leadership

Julia Champe

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [jchampe@siu.edu](mailto:jchampe@siu.edu)

Deborah J. Rubel

*Oregon State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/epse\\_pubs](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/epse_pubs)

Published in *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, Vol. 37 No. 1 (2012) at doi: [10.1080/01933922.2011.632811](https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2011.632811)

---

## Recommended Citation

Champe, Julia and Rubel, Deborah J. "Application of Focal Conflict Theory to Psychoeducational Groups: Implications for Process, Content, and Leadership." (Jan 2012).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Educational Psychology and Special Education at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

Application of Focal Conflict Theory to Psychoeducational Groups: Implications for Process,  
Content, and Leadership

Julia Champe, Ph.D

*Southern Illinois University*

Deborah J. Rubel, Ph.D

*Oregon State University*

Julia Champe, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of counseling education and clinical mental health track Coordinator, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, Southern Illinois University. Deborah Rubel, Ph.D., is an associate professor of Counselor Education, Department of Teacher and Counselor Education, Oregon State University. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Dr. Julia Champe, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, Southern Illinois University, 223 Wham Education Building, Carbondale, IL 62901. Phone: 618-453-6925, Email: jchampe@siu.edu

### **Abstract**

Group psychoeducation is a common group type used for a range of purposes. The literature presents balancing content and process as a challenge for psychoeducational group leaders. While the significance of group psychoeducation is supported, practitioners are given little direction for addressing process in these groups. Focal Conflict Theory (FCT) is a model for conceptualizing and intervening in group process that has been applied to therapy and work groups. This article presents the challenges of psychoeducational groups, describes FCT, and discusses its application to psychoeducational groups using case examples. Implications for leaders of psychoeducation groups are discussed.

*Keywords:* group psychoeducation, focal conflict theory, group leadership, content and process, psychoeducational groups

## **Application of Focal Conflict Theory to Psychoeducational Groups: Implications for Process, Content, and Leadership**

Psychoeducational group work, with its focus on knowledge acquisition and skill development, is perhaps the most frequently implemented group modality in school (Gerrity & DeLucia-Waack, 2007) and agency settings (Burlingame, Earnshaw, Ridge, Matsumo & Lee, 2007). In addition, the structure of psychoeducational groups in many instances lends itself to work with culturally diverse populations (Merta, 1995). The primary characteristics of psychoeducational groups are a focus on educational content and on member learning related to the content (Brown, 1997) applied in the context of group here-and-now interaction. The psychoeducational literature highlights the importance of both emotional safety and stimulation in achieving these objects (Brown; Jones & Robinson, 2000), which requires a balancing of content and process (Dagley, 1999; DeLucia-Waack, 2006; Furr, 2000). However, monitoring, managing, and utilizing the dynamics and process of the group to provide this balance also presents a major challenge to effectively leading a psychoeducational group (DeLucia-Waack, 2006; Jones & Robinson, 2000). Despite the prevalence of psychoeducational groups, little literature provides specific guidance to group leaders to monitor, manage, and utilize group dynamics and processes in psychoeducational groups.

The purpose of this article is to present a model to aid group leaders' in-the-moment conceptualizing and interventions in psychoeducational groups. This article will describe the unique characteristics of psychoeducational groups, focusing on the leadership challenges related to balancing content and process. The article will then outline the key features of Focal Conflict Theory (FCT) and present a discussion of its complementarities to the challenges faced by group workers leading psychoeducational groups. Further, the article will illustrate the use of FCT to

conceptualize process challenges in psychoeducational groups, to construct interventions to address these challenges, and evaluate the outcome of these interventions in psychoeducational groups. The discussion will also include description of FCT- consistent transitions back to content in psychoeducational groups. Finally, case examples will facilitate this illustration.

### **The Challenge of Balancing Content and Process in Psychoeducational Groups**

Content and process are central concepts in group work literature and refer to the focus of interaction within the group. Content refers to the topics, information and ideas imparted in group (Gladding, 2012), and therefore varies, depending on group type and purpose, not only by topic but also by importance. Content is the sine quo non of psychoeducational group work; the primary characteristics of psychoeducational groups are a focus on educational content and on member learning related to the content (Brown, 1997). A survey of psychoeducational group literature indicates most articles describe content, structure and activities for specific populations and issues; little research or conceptual literature is available regarding process.

Group process refers to the nature of interactions among group members, at the individual, interpersonal, and group-as-a-whole levels, as they negotiate communication and participation (Kline, 2003; Rice, 1969; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Similarly, group dynamics refer to both group structure, the relatively stable pattern of norms and roles developed throughout the life of the group (Kline, 2003), as well as the multiple ways in which group members interact around group content and group process (Gladding, 2012). Attending to process in groups means paying attention to and facilitating the manner in which group members talk to one another and how a group reaches decisions, as well as addressing emotions evoked during these interactions (Ettin, Vaughan, & Fiedler, 1987). In their research on group work scholars' conceptualizations

of process and content, Geroski and Kraus (2002) note one participant likened process to a river and content to a boat in the river.

The general group work literature has described attending to group process as the most important part of group work and “the power source of the group” (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p.150). Attending to group process in psychoeducational groups should be distinguished from asking processing questions about content and activities meant only to foster cognitive understanding. Group process in psychoeducational groups takes on different meanings than in does in counseling or therapy groups as it is focused on helping group members acquire knowledge, learn new skills, and engage in activities (DeLucia-Waack, 2004). Furr (2000) emphasizes the tenuous balance between a leader’s responsibility to respond to group process and dynamics and responsibility to maintain structure of the group related to content –related learning objectives. The literature provides several views of this balance.

Some literature suggests that, within psychoeducational groups, attending to process may be less of a priority than it is in other types of group work and may even interfere with achieving group goals. Aasheim and Niemann (2006) describe psychoeducational groups as “less dependent upon the relationships among members and upon elements of group process” (p.272) particularly when group members have a clear understanding of a psychoeducational group’s goals and objectives. Further, several authors warn against an over-focus on process. Furr (2000) cautions against a “tremendous temptation to allow process to overshadow content” (p.44), thereby tipping the group into the realm of therapy. Brown (1997) expresses hesitancy regarding exploration of group members affective responses to group process stating that this may, “...heighten affective resistance to learning and encourage movement into a counseling or psychotherapy group” (p.43).

Other authors focus on attending to group process as necessary and beneficial in psychoeducational groups. Some emphasize that neglecting group process and dynamics in favor of content delivery can result in a group that resembles a class or seminar where members passively receive information (Conyne, 2004; Dagley, 1999) and do not have opportunities to make connections between the educational content and their personal lives (Glass & Benschhoff, 1999). Further commenting on addressing process in psychoeducational groups Ettin, Vaughan, and Fiedler (1987) state, “The leader’s only real choice is how and when to use the group process to support psychoeducational aims” (p. 179). They add that the, “...explicit aim is to use the emerging group process to support and personalize exploration of the contracted focus” (p. 182). Additionally, in discussing structured groups such as these, Yalom and Leszcz (2005) indicate that understanding and judiciously working with the interplay of process and emotions is beneficial.

Additionally several authors answer Brown’s (1997) concerns about bringing emotions related to group process into play. Dagley (1999) claims that the psychoeducational group leader’s role should not be to reduce all anxiety and notes the importance of moderate anxiety and emotional engagement to the learning process. He states, “If comfort is achieved at the expense or possible exclusion of the anxiety that sometimes accompanies or produces change, then it is too costly” (p. 146). Similarly, Ettin, Vaughan, and Fiedler (1987) validate exploring the emotional reactions of group members to the content, tasks, leaders, and other members stating that, ideally, the leader of a psychoeducational group, “...mediates and balances between the topic, tasks, and member reactions” (p. 179). These perspectives are supported by neuroscientists and educational researchers such as Immordino-Yang and Faeth (2009) who emphasize the intricate role of emotions, emotional connection to content, and emotional content

of the learning environment in learning that generalizes to the outside world. Thus, over-focus on content by group leaders limits the potential of psychoeducational groups by overlooking group environment issues, limiting experience, and limiting subsequent processing of experiences.

Herein is the crux of psychoeducational group leadership, perhaps. Too much focus on group process risks veering into the territory of therapy groups, while too much focus on the content and conceptual learning risks merely teaching to people sitting in a circle. Clearly, balancing content and process is critical for psychoeducational group leaders (Ettin, Vaughan, & Fiedler, 1987; Geroski & Kraus, 2002). Yet, despite their centrality, content and process have not been adequately addressed in psychoeducational group work literature (Geroski & Kraus). Additionally, some literature characterizes the difficulty leaders of psychoeducational groups have in using group process effectively as a focus on content at the expense of process (Conyne, 2004; Ettin, Vaughan, & Fiedler; Galinsky, Terzian, & Frazier, 2007 ).

Several authors have attempted to explain why balancing content and process is difficult. DeLucia Waack (2006) describes the difficult task facing psychoeducational group leaders. They must address both content and process, and content typically takes the form of structured group activities. Such activities require time to execute in session, and leaders are often under pressures to cover ambitious amounts of content (Ettin, Vaughan, & Fiedler, 1987; Olson, 2004). Additionally, best practices suggest leaders follow activities with planned processing questions (Brown, 1997; DeLucia Waack, 2006). These duties, while essential, leave little time for processing critical incidents or group interaction aimed at optimizing the group learning environment (Dagley, 1999; DeLucia Waack, 2004).

Others suggest additional challenges to integrating awareness and subsequent management of process into psychoeducational groups. Geroski and Kraus' (2002) research indicates that part of this challenge is the conceptual complexity of the relationship of content and process in psychoeducational groups. Their research on group work scholars' perceptions of content and process in psychoeducational groups suggests that operationalized definitions for these concepts may differ when applied to psychoeducational groups. They further suggest that this complexity and potential confusion could contribute to avoidance of an adequate focus on process in psychoeducational groups. Similarly Dagley (1999) supported a similar position in relation to psychoeducational career groups, "Career counselors have not trusted group process as much as they have group content" (p.146).

Whether lack of trust in group process or in response to uncertainty regarding how best to balance content and process, psychoeducational group leaders who wish to optimize the use of process while respecting the primary content-related purpose of psychoeducational groups are left with little guidance. This is unfortunate in that having conceptual models helps group workers sort and understand complex interactions in their groups and generate purposeful interventions (Kline, 2003). Psychoeducational group literature fails to provide clear theoretical direction for working with group process while respecting the content-related purpose. Focal Conflict Theory has potential to meet these needs. FCT has been associated with psychotherapy groups and, in a limited way, work groups (Whitaker, 2001). This section provides a brief history of the theory, outlines its primary components, and describes its application to psychoeducational groups in terms of conceptualization of process and formulation of leader interventions.

## **Focal Conflict Theory**

Rooted in psychoanalytic theory (French, as cited in Whitaker, 2001), Group Focal Conflict Theory was definitively described by Whitaker (nee Stock) and Lieberman (1964). Whitaker and others continued to develop the theory over the next 40 years (Whitaker, 2000, 2001) and it has been applied to work groups (Whitaker, 1992), social networks (Whitaker, 1987), individual and group psychotherapy (Powles, 1990), and supervision (Brandell, 1992). Unfortunately, its psychoanalytic roots made application of the theory cumbersome. Recently, Kline (2003) provided a clarified interpretation of the theory that transcends psychoanalytic theory. With this clarification, FCT has the potential to comprehensively explain group interaction and provide clear guidance to leaders for balancing content and process in psychoeducational groups. The following paragraphs describe the basic structure of FCT and relate this to leader interventions.

The key tenets of FCT are: 1) Repetition or *themes* in group interaction represent group members' collective concerns, 2) the desire to openly express these concerns represents a *disturbing motive*, 3) the fear of repercussions for openly expressing concerns represents a *reactive motive*, 4) tension between the disturbing and reactive motives represents a *group focal conflict* which causes anxiety and must be resolved by the group, 5) *solutional conflicts* emerge within the group when members disagree about the resolution. Whitman and Stock (1958) note that some *focal conflicts* may be universal to all groups. One such *focal conflict* is related to confidentiality as members wish to trust the group but fear betrayal by other group members. Another potentially universal *focal conflict* arises when members want to examine relationships in the group but fear hurting one another by doing so. Yet another is the desire to share personal

insecurities or needs while fearing rejection for voicing these. While many other potential *focal conflicts* may arise, these familiar scenarios highlight the common tensions in groups.

FCT further describes the patterns of interaction, or *solutions*, groups utilize to resolve the anxiety caused by disturbing and reactive motives (Kline, 2003). Solutions are analogous to group norms that create boundaries within which groups may safely operate (Whitaker, 2001). These *solutions* to the anxiety caused by focal conflicts can be viewed as fitting within one of two general categories. Interaction patterns that discourage expression of *disturbing* and *reactive motives* (important concerns and fears associated with expressing the concerns, respectively) are characterized as *restrictive solutions*. In contrast, interaction patterns that allow relatively open expression of *disturbing* and *reactive motives* are characterized as *enabling solutions*. Each of these solution types is more fully described below.

*Enabling solutions* support growth producing group environments by allowing wide explorations of thoughts, feelings, and actions (Whitaker, 2001). These solutions are invariably focused within the group and are concerned in some way with overarching group goals, relationships within the group, or the group environment. Kline (2003) associates enabling solutions with the more common concept of helping norms, which he describes as including such things as sharing and working with feelings, giving feedback, checking for understanding during communication, and interacting in the here and now. When *enabling solutions* are introduced to a group the group's anxiety will increase for a short time, because they confront the source of anxiety, the focal conflict. If the group, with the leader's support, is able to stay engaged and active in an open discussion of either the *reactive motive* or the *disturbing motive* then anxiety is eventually reduced and group development is enhanced.

Conversely, *restrictive solutions* severely limit what can be explored. Kline (2003) associates *restrictive solutions* with the more common concept of obstructive norms. One common *restrictive solution* occurs when a group member breaks a group silence with a joke, spurring sudden group laughter and a release of tension. Prolonged discussions of external topics that are irrelevant to group purpose are also a common example of a *restrictive solution* to anxiety caused by the *focal conflict*. *Restrictive solutions* serve as a kind of “escape hatch” (Lonergan, 1994) by *immediately reducing anxiety*. While such solutions are a normal part of social interaction, groups that continually seek out *restrictive solutions* can soon become shallow, boring, and unproductive as acceptable ways of interacting are winnowed down to a limited, anxiety-free few.

*Solutional conflicts* occur when group members present several solutions to lower group anxiety and do not immediately negotiate a resolution. For example, having tired of a group’s discussion of recent movies, two members attempt to re-focus group attention on the session topic of shame, only to be teased by the rest of the group for being “no fun.” This interaction represents two *restrictive solutions* (focusing on an external topic and teasing outliers) pitted against a relatively *enabling solution* (attempting to move towards the group’s session purpose and share feelings). Resolutions of *group focal conflicts* that result in group environments characterized by largely *enabling solutions* promote group development and member learning. Conversely, resolution of *group focal conflicts* that results in environments characterized by largely *restrictive solutions* stymie group development progress and member learning.

Group leaders bear the responsibility for creating enabling group environments (Kline, 2003). This is because *focal conflicts* cause anxiety, and group members will tend to avoid anxiety with socially familiar strategies, generally *restrictive solutions*. Therefore, group leaders

must actively discourage *restrictive solutions* and encourage *enabling solutions* to move the group towards a more facilitative environment. Kline outlines a variety of simple, brief, and direct strategies for “frustrating” *restrictive solutions* and encouraging *enabling solutions*. First, Kline indicates that the most effective way to discourage *restrictive solutions* is to verbalize the *disturbing motive* (wish) and the *reactive motive* (fears) at their root. He also provides further suggestions for dealing with *restrictive solutions* including identifying *restrictive solutions* to the group, encouraging group members to discuss how the *restrictive solution* will impact achievement of shared group goals, encouraging the group to find and commit to *enabling solutions* that will help achieve shared group goals, and if a more intense intervention is necessary to dislodge a *restrictive solution*, openly challenging the group’s use of it.

Thus in the above example of the “movie discussion,” the group leader can point out the *solutional conflict* and help the group resolve it by supporting group members in articulating their frustrations with the group’s avoidance of the session topic while encouraging other members to express their apprehensions about discussing shame. The group leader could also highlight the two *restrictive solutions* and have the group discuss the impact the solutions will have on meeting group goals. To further illustrate using another *restrictive solution*, when a group habitually uses laughter to avoid difficult feelings the leader may block *the restrictive solution* (joking) by ignoring the disruption and refocusing on the source of the group’s discomfort. Alternatively, the leader can encourage an *enabling solution* by asking the group to reflect on and discuss the anxiety underlying the laughter. Allowing the group to continue to trade jokes, however, establishes this as an effective *restrictive solution*, one that over time becomes a group norm that limits the possible solutions available to the group for addressing anxiety. While the Focal Conflict Theory includes other components, this article will use

the basic structure described above to explore how to work with process in psychoeducational groups. The basic structure of FCT can assist leaders of psychoeducational groups in identifying both beneficial and counterproductive group interactions and with formulating effective leader interventions. For more detailed descriptions and discussion of Focal Conflict Theory, see Kline, 2003; Whitaker, 1989, 2000 and 2001. The following sections explore more in depth how FCT can be used to conceptualize and intervene in psychoeducational groups in a way that balances content and process.

### **Application of Focal Conflict Theory to Psychoeducational Groups**

With Focal Conflict Theory, the psychoeducational group leaders will be able to 1) hypothesize likely *disturbing* and *reactive motives* at play in groups that create a *focal conflict*, 2) anticipate *restrictive solutions* and identify them when they emerge, 3) recognize *solutional conflicts* within groups, and 4) create interventions that move the group towards *enabling solutions* and agreed upon goals.

While Focal Conflict Theory has mainly found use in therapy groups where describing and resolving tensions between group members forms the basis of therapeutic insight and change (Whitaker, 2001), it can be usefully applied to three aspects of psychoeducational groups where addressing group process is supported by the literature. First, effective learning in psychoeducational groups requires an environment that is safe, stimulating, and responsive to the role of emotions in learning (Dagley, 1999; Immordino-Yang & Faeth, 2009). Second, effective psychoeducational groups optimize learning by utilizing the group process and the involvement of group members in each other's learning (Conyne, 2004; Ettin, Vaughan, & Fieldler, 1987). Third, members' reactions or relationships to the content of the group are worth exploration and processing (DeLucia Waack, 2006; Ettin, Vaughan, & Fieldler; McNair, Elliot, & Yoder, 1991;

McWhirter, 1994). These represent three levels of interaction in psychoeducational groups where FCT may be applied.

The defining characteristic of psychoeducational groups, their focus on educational content and member learning, also poses a challenge to conceptualization and intervention using FCT, which has largely been used to describe process and process intervention. However, Whitaker (1992) in her discussion of applying FCT to work groups provides some guidance. In this discussion she equates the commonly agreed-upon task focus of the group to a persistent theme or *disturbing motive* of the group. Similarly, the learning objectives and associated content of a psychoeducational group, when agreed upon by group members, can be conceptualized as *disturbing motives* to which the group promptly should return when *restrictive solutions* have been blocked. Thus, when group members embrace and find meaningful the psychoeducational group's learning objectives, returning to the content and engaging in content-related activities represent *enabling solutions*. The following sections will explore application of FCT to conceptualization of group interaction and leader interventions to create optimal learning environments, utilize group process and member involvement in learning, and explore member reactions to content while not losing focus on content and content-related activities. Table 1 offers a summary of common *disturbing motives*, *reactive motives*, *restrictive solutions*, and *enabling solutions* in psychoeducational group work. A case study will provide examples illustrating this exploration. The case example uses a ten-week high school study skills group where members have agreed to the learning objectives of the group with the group leader and with each other.

It should be noted that before applying FCT the group leader in this case, Jill, has done much of the ground work associated with competent group work. She has prepared herself

through education and supervision, as well as through self-reflection and challenging to become aware of how her own life and cultural experiences affect her group leadership (ASGW, 2007; ASGW, 1999). She has planned group content and activities to reflect the anticipated stage of group development and the learning objectives intended for the group (Fur, 2000) and with an awareness of the potential needs of her members and their experiences within the school, community, and society at large (ASGW, 2007; ASGW, 1999). She has also screened, gained informed consent, and prepared her group members as appropriate for the school site (DeLucia Waack, 2006). The learning objectives she has discussed with the group members and their parents include being able to understand the importance of study skills in and out of school, create academic goals, identify barriers to motivation, create and apply a time-management plan, communicate more effectively with teachers, access the library as a study resource, and apply several new study strategies.

**FCT applied to creating optimal learning environments.** In any group, creating a cohesive safe environment is critical to accomplishing the group's tasks (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Appropriate levels of safety and cohesiveness promote self-disclosure and interpersonal learning. Safety and cohesiveness are certainly integral to effective psychoeducational groups. Psychological safety concerns in psychoeducational groups may arise as themes such as a focus on confidentiality, a focus on not appearing "dumb," or a focus on a withholding or judgmental member. Such safety concerns are usually expressed as the *reactive motive* or fear of repercussions for open expression. Here FCT is used to conceptualize an interaction representing a safety concern in our example study-skills group.

*In the second meeting of the group the leader, Jill, notices that most of the group members seem very quiet. Even as she asks them questions about their short homework task*

*related to communicating with teachers to clarify assignments, most of the members remain silent or give minimal answers to her probes. She asks the group what their silence is about. Only one group member, Aisha, seems open to talking about her experience. She states that while she did the homework and got a lot out of it, she didn't want it "torn apart" in front of the class if she shared it. Eric, who is sitting next to Aisha, says that he did the homework too, but wasn't sure he did it right. The leader asks the rest of the group if this is what they experienced too. Several in the group mumble that they tried the homework but felt like Eric. Another group member, Janet, states that she thought the homework was "stupid," so she didn't do it. When Jill asks Janet what "stupid" means to her, Janet replies, "Stupid, like all homework is stupid. It wastes your time because you can't get it right anyway." The leader can see many heads nod around the circle as Janet talks. Jill is at loss for what to do and is considering going over the homework portion individually with the group members later and using the group time to explain concepts and strategies since group members seem so sensitive to criticism.*

In the above case segment, a *disturbing motive* may be represented by Aisha and Eric's desire to share about their homework. Their relative willingness to talk and the fact that both brought up that the homework was both personal and helpful to them speaks to a desire to share about the activity and their learning. The *reactive motive* may also be represented by Aisha's fear that her work will be "torn apart" and Eric's fear that he did his work incorrectly – essentially fears of rejection. In that moment Aisha and Eric are working with relatively *enabling solutions* – they are talking more directly about what they want to share and also about their fears. Janet's sharing represents a relatively *restrictive solution* in that she is condemning the homework altogether in reaction to the same fears. The leader too is toying with a *restrictive solution* in conceptualizing the group as unable to handle sharing their homework. These three

sets of solutions represent a *solutional conflict* that the leader should help resolve. The question then becomes how.

To facilitate resolution the leader first must identify the *disturbing motive* and *reactive motive* as well as the variety of solutions presented, including her own relatively *restrictive solution*. With that in mind Jill must both encourage *enabling solutions* and discourage *restrictive solutions* by encouraging group members to talk as directly as feasible about the *disturbing motive* and *reactive motives*. In this case, the leader could spend some time exploring Aisha and Eric's experiences of doing the homework and their fears of sharing it with the group. Additionally, she could openly state the *disturbing motive* (in this case the learning objectives of the group) and *reactive motives* that are most prevalent. This might sound like, "It seems like many of you really want to learn these skills but it's frightening to even care about school." Or, "Some of you would love to share what you're learning but think you might be criticized in here." This could be followed by briefly processing the effect this fear will have on meeting their objectives and brainstorming with them what they can do in group so that it will feel safer doing and sharing their group homework.

After the group members commit to several ideas to improve safety and most members express willingness to engage in future homework and sharing, the leader can transition back to processing homework, presenting the next skill, and engaging in the related activity. If time is truly limited, the group may simply be left with a brief statement that acknowledges the time limit, the *disturbing* and *reactive motives*, and a sense that *enabling solutions* must be sought, "We have to move on, but we've got to keep an eye on this fear of judgment and failure and find some ways to keep it from getting in the way of the changes you want."

**Focal Conflict Theory applied to utilizing group process and member involvement in learning.** Leaders of successful psychoeducational groups use group process and involve group members in each others' learning. FCT can be applied at this second level of interaction to examine ways in which a group develops, maintains or avoids topics relevant to the psychoeducational content (Whitaker, 2001). Group process associated with member learning may center on how members negotiate group safety guidelines, the ways in which members interact when giving and receiving feedback, or how the group responds to educational content or activities. In the following vignette, FCT is used to conceptualize an interaction representing the use of group process to involve group members in the learning process.

*Jill stifled a yawn as she counted; four group members had yet to present their project, a personal plan for time management, this morning. As she scanned the group, she saw that few members appeared to be listening to Courtney, who was reading directly from her worksheet. "Good grief, this is boring! But at least they all did it." Jill thought. For the past fifteen minutes, group members had taken turns presenting their plans to their fellow group members who were supposed to give "supportive feedback" to the presenter. Although she'd noticed members talking to one another about the assignment as they settled into their seats, now members had little to say to one another beyond "I think you did a good job." Courtney was only the third to present, and already the energy seemed completely gone from group. "This isn't working," Jill thought. She'd wanted members to have meaningful discussions about their plans, what they had learned, and how they could improve. But that wasn't happening. She knew it wasn't going well, but she felt hesitant to make a change. In an earlier session, some constructive feedback among members had resulted in hurt feelings and precious group time was spent clearing the air. In an attempt to manage time better and avoid such negative interactions, Jill asked*

*members to “be supportive” in their feedback to one another. While “feedback” is now polite, it is meaningless and members are disengaged. If she were to try to make a change now, how would the group members react... and what would they think of her leadership?*

In this scenario, the dampening effect of *restrictive solutions* on group interaction is illustrated. The leader has chosen a *restrictive solution* that stifles group member interaction. Driven by a desire to protect herself and group members from further unpleasantness and processing time, Jill has unconsciously supported the notion that constructive feedback is hurtful. In doing so, she has acted on her own *reactive motive* related to fears of affective expression and inadequacy as a leader. As a result, honest member-to-member interaction is restricted. With that gone so it the opportunity for members to receive valuable information from peers about their work. Given the group’s past experience with a challenging feedback exchange and members’ own *reactive motives*, fears of rejection and hurt feelings, members will probably not act on their *disturbing motive* related to the group’s learning objectives - the desire to help each other learn. Instead, members succumb to the predominant *reactive motive*, and adopt a *restrictive solution* of meaningless feedback and disengagement

At this moment, Jill faces a *solutional conflict*: if she acts on the *disturbing motive*, a wish for members’ open expression and mutual learning, she needs to take immediate action to change how the group is proceeding, and she risks the group’s confusion and criticism. If she allows the group to continue as is, the presentations will be completed on schedule at the expense of member learning. Jill decides to risk looking uncertain and falling behind schedule by moving towards an *enabling solution*. Following Kline’s (2003) interventions to frustrate *restrictive solutions* Jill can verbalize the predominant *disturbing* and *reactive motives*, “Something’s going on here, the energy is really low. I was nervous about constructive feedback and avoiding it

because of the hurt feelings last week, but I also find myself really wanting to be helpful and also see you help each other. I wonder if that is what you're experiencing too."

Subsequently, she can continue to encourage members to focus on the *disturbing motive*, perhaps by saying "I'm guessing that part of you really wants to share your plans and get useful ideas from each other so you can get a lot out of this group." She could follow this with an exploration of how the *restrictive solution* of "supportive feedback" has affected the feel of the group and their chances of having successful plans. Finally, Jill could ask the group members to come up with *enabling solutions*, "What ideas do you have that would help us be supportive by giving honest, useful feedback in here?" When members have come up with some viable ideas and most have expressed willingness to experiment with giving and receiving constructive feedback, the leader can move the group to finishing the activity, maybe in abbreviated form. To save time, Jill may need to provide some viable options to the group such as, "Will it feel safer if each person asks for constructive feedback before getting it and each person can pass?" Again, if time is extremely limited Jill may be left giving a brief statement that acknowledges the time limit, the *disturbing* and *reactive motives*, and a sense that enabling solutions must be sought, "We have to move on with the reports, but we need to find a way to beat these nerves about constructive feedback so that they don't get in the way of your learning from one another in here."

**Focal Conflict Theory applied to group members' reactions and relationships to psychoeducational content.** Leaders of psychoeducational groups also can use FCT to address members' reactions and relationship to the content that might motivate or stymie meeting group learning objectives. Leaders of psychoeducational groups often face time-management challenges and understandably may focus on content delivery in response. "Covering" the

content may supersede exploring members' reactions to what they are learning (Ettin, Vaughan, & Fieldler, 1987). While this may be perceived as an efficient use of group time, it can have negative consequences for group process and dynamics and impede real learning. However, encouraging members to express their reactions to content may seem risky to leaders (Furr, 2000): members may express distaste for an assignment, be critical of the leader for the assignment, or report that they did not learn anything from completing it. The following scenario further illustrates how FCT can be used to conceptualize attending to members' relationship and reaction to content.

*While members have been engaging in activities and have been taking risks to give useful feedback to each other, Jill has gotten a sense over time that some members are frustrated with some of the content and activities. To better understand this, Jill plans to deviate from asking group members to report the results of their group homework. Instead she plans to ask group members to talk about how they felt during a library resources assignment and what they learned about themselves as a result. At the next meeting, Jill begins by asking the whole group, "So what was it like to do this library project?" She hears a muffled laugh, then someone says "It was ok" and others nod in agreement. After another silence, Tiana says, "I don't know if I got this right, but..." and begins to describe in detail what she has done. Jill tries to re-direct Tiana by saying "And how did it feel to do all that?" Tiana looks confused and replies, "It was ok..." "What do you think you learned about yourself from doing all that work?" "Um, I don't know..." Stacy speaks up, "I learned a lot about how the library works, and that's something I can use later on." A few members nod, and Courtney says, "I didn't know about how books were cataloged, so that was cool."*

*Jill has a sense that this isn't going anywhere so she verbalizes her ideas about the disturbing and reactive motive, "I have a sense that some of you have some negative feelings about this assignment, but I imagine it would be hard to talk about in here, in front of me and everyone else." The group was silent for a while and then Trey, one of the least active group members adds, "No offense, Jill but I'm not really a library person. It was a waste." Andy jumps in to agree, "Yeah, it was pretty boring. I know everything I need to know about all that." Jill feels a bit flustered and asks, "So some of you thought the activity was valuable, and some of you thought it wasn't. I also hear something behind your opinions- excitement, annoyance. Those reactions are important. Trey, can you talk about how you felt?" After a minute, Trey says, "Yeah, annoyed. It's just a waste of my time. I am not going to be doing anything in a library. I already have a job lined up with my old man at the mine for after I graduate. So it's like everything else around here. Everyone in this school is putting on the pressure to go to college. But if you won't, then you're a loser and there's nothing for you here." Everyone in the group looks tense.*

In this vignette, the leader's attempt to focus on members' affective reactions to the content and learning process is initially met with some confusion and resistance by the group members. In part, this may be due to the change in focus itself. It may also represent a *restrictive solution* related to members' desire to talk about their reactions (a *disturbing motive*) and the fear that doing so will be unacceptable to other group members or the leader (a *reactive motive*). Despite the initial confusion and anxiety when Jill attempts to explore the *disturbing motive* she suspects is at work, she persists in asking members to share affective reactions to the activity (an enabling solution). Knowing that this is both a new focus and one that is likely to trigger a *reactive motive* (a fear of affective or intellectual exposure) she is not discouraged when

members respond with a relatively *restrictive solution*, limiting self-disclosure to evaluation of the merits of the exercise. Instead, she frustrates the *restrictive solution* by verbalizing the *disturbing* and *reactive motives*. Trey responds and seems for the first time today to be engaged, as are other group members. So Jill approaches him directly, believing he is the most able at the moment to identify and articulate his reaction to the content. Trey's response supports an *enabling solution* and brings to light his frustration and sense of alienation in the school, potentially related to socioeconomic status (SES) or class issues.

As time permits, Jill may choose to explore the connection between his experience and the impact of sociocultural elements of the school and community, especially if her awareness is that this is an issue that affects the engagement and success of many students in the school and the group. She should at the minimum present the desire to talk honestly about the impact of social issues on school work as a *disturbing motive* and the fears associated with that as a *reactive motive*, "I know that talking about how things like social class can affect school can be pretty scary. But it seems like sometimes you might want or even need to do that for this group to work for you."

The opportunity now exists for this member to receive meaningful support from other members, and for the group to explore affective reactions to content at a deeper level. To further establish this *enabling solution*, Jill could draw out Andy who expressed similar if less articulate feelings, as well as other group members. To connect this *enabling solution* to group goals she could highlight its impact, "Hearing how you all really feel about this activity is going to help us make this group more useful to you." Then she could move back into content by having group members brainstorm how to connect the skills from the library project to nonschool contexts, such as Trey's anticipated work.

## Summary

Balancing content and process in psychoeducational groups is presented as a challenge in the literature (Ettin, Vaughan, & Fiedler, 1987; Geroski & Kraus, 2002) with many authors presenting the predominant issue as an under-focus on process (Conyne, 2004; Ettin, Vaughan, & Fiedler; Galinsky, Terzian, & Frazier, 2007). Focal Conflict Theory offers a simple way to conceptualize common psychoeducational group member concerns, how they play out in group process, and how they might be expediently addressed.

FCT offers a novel perspective on effective psychoeducational group work; after all, attending to members' unconscious wishes or fears is not typically included on the list of psychoeducational group leadership tasks. This innovative framework gives psychoeducational group leaders a new perspective within which to interpret, assess and intervene to aid group members' learning. In the preceding examples, for instance, it is imaginable how some members might easily be labeled as difficult, resistant or even unsuitable for this particular psychoeducational group. Some events, like sporadic homework completion, hurtful feedback exchanges, or criticism of assignments could be taken as evidence of a "bad group." Using FCT as a model for conceptualizing group interaction moves the leader's focus away from identifying potentially troublesome people or events based on limited categories to thinking about group and member interaction in more flexible and less stigmatizing ways. Then, member motives are understood as reasonable, if unconscious, relational movements in groups.

Applied to psychoeducational groups, FCT provides group leaders with justification for cultivating a group learning environment by attending to the psychological and emotional safety of its members, seeing group process and member involvement as critical factors in meeting group learning goals, and exploring member relationships to educational content and learning

goals. In addition, FCT may help group leaders reflect on his or her own reactions that may hinder or facilitate group interaction and development. Perhaps most importantly, Focal Conflict Theory, in providing this framework, offers points for interventions that allow leaders to attend to group process related to learning.

As psychoeducational group work is increasingly implemented in a variety of professional settings, it is important that group workers resist the proliferation of mediocre models of psychoeducational group work that characterize it as primarily an efficient content delivery method. A key part of this resistance is a sustained and concerted effort at attending to process in the service of psychoeducational group learning goals. While the tension between content and process may always be a central challenge of psychoeducational group work, Focal Conflict Theory expands the notions of what is relevant and useful to attend to in group. For leaders of psychoeducational groups, FCT may prove to be an easy and effective way of attending to content and process.

## References

- Aasheim, L.L. & Niemann, S.H. (2006). Guidance/psychoeducational groups. In D. Capuzzi, D.R. Gross, & M.D. Stauffer (Eds.), *Introduction to group work* (pp.269-293). Denver, Co: Love.
- Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW), (2008). ASGW best practice guidelines. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 33, 111-117.
- Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW). (1999). Principles for diversity-competent group workers. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, pp. 7–14.
- Brandell, J. (1992). Focal conflict analysis: A method of supervision in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 10, 51-69.
- Brown, B.M. (1997). Psychoeducation group work. *Counseling and Human Development*, 29, 1-14.
- Burlingame, G.M., Earnshaw, D., Ridge, N.W., Matsumo, J. & Lee.J. (2007). Psychoeducational group treatment for the severely and persistently mentally ill: How much leader training is necessary to realize patient improvement? *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 57, 187-218.
- Conyne, R. K. (2004). Prevention groups. In J. L. DeLucia-Waack, D. A. Gerrity, C. R. Kalodner, & M. T. Riva (eds.) *Handbook of group counseling and psychotherapy* (621-629). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dagley, J.C. (1999). The restoration of group process in career counseling groups. *International Journal of Action Methods*, 51, 141-157.

- DeLucia-Waack, J.L. (2004). Inappropriate group activities. In L. E. Tyson, R. Perusse, & J. Whitley (Eds.), *Critical incidents in group counseling* (pp. 59-65). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- DeLucia-Waack, J.L. (2004). *Leading psychoeducational groups for children and adolescents*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ettin, M. F., Vaughan, E., & Fiedler, N. (1987). Managing group process in nonprocess groups: Working with the theme-centered psychoeducational group. *Group, 11*, 177-192.
- Furr, S.R. (2000). Structuring the group experience: A format for designing psychoeducational groups. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 25*, 29-49.  
doi:10.1080/019339220008411450
- Gladding, S.T. (2012). *Groups: A counseling specialty*. Indianapolis, IN: Pearson.
- Galinsky, M. J., Terzian, M. A., Fraser, M. W. (2007). The art of groupwork practice with manualized curricula. *Social Work with Groups, 17*, 74-92.
- Gerrity, D.A. & DeLucia-Waack, J.L. (2007). Effectiveness of groups in the schools. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 32*, 97-106. doi:10.1080/01933920600978604
- Geroski A.M & Kraus, K.L.(2002). Process and content in school psychoeducational groups: Either, both or none? *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 27*, 233-245. doi:10.1080/742848694
- Glass, J.S. & Benschoff, J.M. (1999). PARS: A processing model for beginning group leaders. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 24*, 15-26. doi:10.1080/01933929908411416

- Immordino-Yang, M. H., & Faeth, M. (2009). The role of emotion and skilled intuition in learning. In D. A. Sousa (Ed.), *Mind, Brain, and Education* (pp.66-81). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.
- Jones, K.D. & Robinson, E.H. (2000). Psychoeducational groups: A model for choosing topics and exercises appropriate to group stage. *Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 25, 356-365. doi: 10.1080/01933920008411679
- Kline, W.B. (2003). *Interactive Group Counseling and Therapy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Lonergan, E. C. (1994). Using theories of group therapy. In H.S. Bernard & K.R. MacKenzie (Eds.), *Basics of Group Psychotherapy*. (pp. 189-216). New York: Guilford Press.
- McNair, R. R., Elliot, T., & Yoder, B. (1991). AIDS prevention groups as persuasive appeals: Effects on attitudes about precautionary behaviors among person in substance abuse treatment. *Small Group Research*, 22, 301-319.
- McWhirter, E. H. (1994). *Counseling for empowerment*. Alexandria, VA: ACA.
- Merta, R. (1995). Group work: Multicultural perspectives. In J. Ponterotto, J. M.Casas, L. Suzuki, & C. Alexander (Eds.). *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 567–585). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Powles, W.E. (1990). Design with borderline personalities: Can focal conflict theory help? In B.E.Roth, W.N.Stone & H.D. Kibel (Eds.), *The difficult patient in group: Group psychotherapy with borderline and narcissistic disorders*. (pp.67-85). Madison, CT: International Universities Press.
- Rice, A. K. (1969). Individual, group, and intergroup processes. *Human Relations*, 22, 565-584.
- Whitaker, D.S. & Lieberman, M.A. (1964). *Psychotherapy through the group process*. New York: Atherton Press.

Whitaker, D.S. (1989). Group focal conflict theory: Description, illustration and evaluation.

*Group, 13*, 225-251.

Whitaker, D.S. (1987). Groupwork understandings and skills applied to intervening in personal networks. *Journal of Social Work Practice, 2*, 93-112.

Whitaker, D.S. (1992). Transposing learnings from group psychotherapy to work groups. *Group Analysis, 25*, 131-149.

Whitaker, D.S. (2000). Theory-building, theory-use and practice in group psychotherapy. *Group Analysis, 33*, 559-573.

Whitaker, D.S. (2001). *Using groups to help people*. Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis.

Whitman, R.M & Stock, D. (1958). The group focal conflict. *Psychiatry, 21*, 269-276.

Yalom, I., & Leszcz, M. (2005). *The theory and practice of group psychotherapy* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Basic Books.

Table 1. Selected Focal Conflicts in Psychoeducational Groups

<b>Disturbing Motive</b>	<b>Reactive Motive</b>	<b>Restrictive Solution</b>	<b>Enabling Solution</b>
Members want to share reactions to content or activities	Fear of rejection or judgment by members or leader	Focus on content acquisition; intellectualize; disengage	Discuss relevance of affective reactions to learning
Members want to discuss problematic group dynamics and interactions	Fear of rejection and ruptured relationships	Ignore problematic interactions; focus on group rule development ; disengage	Share concerns about openly discussing group dynamics and interactions
Members want to talk about personal learning re: group objectives and content	Fear of affective and intellectual exposure	Limit self-disclosure to cognitive evaluation of content utility	Share self-awareness and insight about learning style
Members want to ask for support in applying learning to their lives	Fear of ridicule	Adopt an apathetic attitude; communicate false confidence	Discuss doubts about and consequences of change, including sociocultural barriers
Members want to receive and give meaningful feedback	Fear of rejection and fear of being hurt	Give no feedback; give non-specific positive feedback	Articulate desired feedback and support needed from group