The first section of this text presents concepts that help group leaders comprehend group interaction and begin to conceptualize group interventions. These concepts are organized into six chapters.

Chapter 2, “The Interactive Group Environment,” presents group dynamics principles that are essential for group leaders. The chapter discusses norms and roles in terms of their importance, development, and implications for effectively functioning groups. These primary concepts are also discussed in terms of how they influence members’ attitudes regarding group membership.

Chapter 3, “Group Development Theory,” presents four theories of group development and a discussion of the essential themes in group development theory. The four theories were selected because of their contributions to the group counseling and therapy literature. Bion’s theory of group development was one of the first theories to describe group development and was the first group development theory to illustrate the recurring nature of group members’ concerns.

Bennis and Shepard’s theory provides one of the most complete descriptions of group development phases. It also includes an important discussion regarding the significance of members’ personalities and interpersonal issues on how groups develop over time.

Schutz’s theory provides a perspective that was the culmination of the most comprehensive research in the area of group development. His theory contains perspectives on recurrent group issues, the role of interpersonal needs in group development, and the significance of members’ personalities on group development and interaction.

Finally, Tuckman’s theory of group development is presented for several important reasons. First, his initial and revised theory represents a complete overview of the findings of many group development articles. Second, his theory is probably
the most widely cited group development theory in the group counseling and therapy literature.

More recent group development research is extremely limited and does not contradict the findings of these classic and still state-of-the-art group development theories. Readers may encounter texts that present group development phases to organize their discussion. These organizational schemas are rarely based on research and are not intended to be formal theory.

Chapter 4, “Interactive Group Development Theory,” systematically presents common themes in group development theory. This synthesis, presented as a theory, emphasizes an interactive perspective on group development. An extensive example of ongoing group interaction illustrates how these common themes impact group interaction and development.

Chapter 5, “Group Theory Introduction and Focal Conflict Theory,” discusses criteria for selecting group counseling and therapy theory and introduces the theories that meet these conditions, concluding with a discussion of focal conflict theory. Although focal conflict theory is an elegant approach to comprehending group interaction, it appears very rarely in group counseling literature (e.g., Donigian & Malnati, 1997).

Chapter 6, “General Systems Theory,” discusses the applications of general systems theory for group counseling and therapy. This discussion shows how basic systems concepts can be used to conceptualize group interaction and interventions. Not included here are more recent applications of general systems theory to group therapy that stress the synthesis of systems and analytic thinking to group therapy (e.g., Agazarian, 1997).

Chapter 7, “The Interpersonal Approach and Group Theory Summary,” presents an overview of important interpersonal processes. This presentation stresses concepts related to interpersonal learning. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the common themes presented in these theories.

Each of the theories presented in Chapters 5 to 7 makes special contributions to the conceptualization of group interaction and to defining interventions that address counseling and therapy groups as social systems. Because these theories recognize groups as social systems, they offer perspectives that use the power of group interactions to help members change. Using such power is the essence of the interactive perspective.
OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

✔ Demonstrate an understanding of group dynamics concepts that are useful for interactive group counseling and therapy and for conceptualizing groups as social systems.
✔ Describe the relationship between group process and structure.
✔ Describe how group norms develop and what norms are consistent with effective and ineffective group functioning.
✔ Discuss how group member roles develop and the factors that influence their enactment.
✔ Discuss how member roles can facilitate or hinder effective group functioning.
✔ Indicate how norms and roles influence member attitudes and what member attitudes are consistent with productive group experiences.

INTRODUCTION

A crucial leadership goal is to develop a group environment that facilitates the development of essential member attitudes. To accomplish this goal, leaders need to understand some essential group dynamics properties that influence the effectiveness of the group environment. Once leaders have learned how to observe these properties, they can identify the restraining and facilitating forces in their groups and intervene to help members develop attitudes that support interpersonal learning.
Various disciplines interested in understanding group interaction have used the term *group dynamics* (Vander Kolk, 1985). Because these disciplines operate from diverse perspectives, there are many variations in the definition of group dynamics. This section defines group dynamics in a way that will help leaders observe and conceptualize group interaction. *Group dynamics* describes the purposes of group interaction (group process) and the interactive patterns (group structure) that emerge from these interactions.

A *group process* consists of interactions that “promote behavioral and attitudinal conformity with the group’s emerging culture” (Wheelan, 1994, pp. 60–61). That is, group interaction involves members negotiating how to communicate, participate, and perceive group involvement. Group interactions include negotiations about how intimately members should interact, whether and how members should acknowledge and handle conflict, the acceptable level of honesty, what to expect from each member, and how to respond to each others’ concerns. As leaders observe group interaction, the questions “What is the purpose of this interaction?” and “What are members negotiating?” will help them identify group process. Leaders can intervene to shape the development of the group environment after identifying group process negotiations. These interventions are discussed in the chapters of section 2.

The following discussion is a common example of negotiation in an early group meeting and depicts the group process of directly negotiating sharing emotions.

FRANCIS: “I’m not sure why having to share my feelings is so important. We shouldn’t have to do it.”

GEORGE: “I agree; it seems like we can talk about our problems, and that would be enough to help.”

DAVE: “That’s right, we should talk about what we’re having problems with and not have to get into feelings!”

Group process also includes more subtle, indirect negotiations. Indirect negotiations occur as members observe the outcomes of others’ interactions. These observed outcomes shape what members regard as safe or acceptable group behavior. Interactions that appear to have productive or nonthreatening outcomes are repeated, and those that have apparently negative outcomes are less likely to recur. Thus, indirect negotiations have the same effect on interaction as direct negotiation. For example, if sharing emotions seems productive, members are more likely to share emotions. If, on the other hand, sharing emotions seems damaging, members will attempt to avoid sharing emotions.

A more specific example of an indirect negotiation occurred in the third meeting of a group. During this meeting, Brian expressed his anger about Sally’s participation. Rob, another group member, reacted. “Stop! Can’t you see Sally is hurt?” The other group members looked on in stunned silence until Sally spoke. “Brian, your anger really hurt me. I didn’t come here to be hurt like this!” In this example, a powerful indirect negotiation took place. All group members experienced anger as hurtful and as something to be avoided.
Direct and indirect negotiation processes frequently have the purpose of avoiding risky interaction. When they are successful, members are not likely to share honest reactions or to participate spontaneously. Consequently, leaders should be alert to members negotiating "rules" for interaction that limit what can be shared. Members use negotiations to add certainty and safety to interaction and to avoid the uncertainty of group membership. Unfortunately, these negotiations can block interchanges that can help members learn.

Group process negotiations inevitably establish stable patterns in group interaction. These patterns include consistencies in the attitudes that members develop about participation and how they interact with each other. These stable patterns are referred to as **group structure** (Forsyth, 1999). The most significant of these patterns are norms and roles. **Norms** describe consistent patterns in the behaviors of all group members. **Roles** describe unique behaviors consistently performed by individual group members.

### Norms

When people talk about a group they belong to, they usually describe the behaviors they perform as a member. These behaviors identify the norms that operate in that group. Norms are the “unwritten code of behavioral rules . . . that guide the interaction of the group” (Yalom, 1995, p. 109). Because norms dictate how members interact, they determine a group’s effectiveness.

Leaders should be aware that the behaviors necessary for productive group interaction become norms only when they become a pattern in group interaction. This means that the guidelines leaders suggest for effective interaction or the ways in which members agree to interact do not have an effect on what members actually do until they become norms. For example, a group leader may suggest that members restate feedback to ensure they understand the feedback. Following this suggestion, some members immediately accept feedback, and some restate it. At this point, restating feedback is not a norm and does not have a meaningful impact on group interaction. Later, when members restate feedback and correct others who do not, restating feedback has become a norm and has an effect on how feedback is exchanged.

**Norms** prescribe a range of productive or ineffective group interactions and indicate attitudes members share about participation. If a group’s norms preclude meaningful interaction, this indicates that group members share attitudes that block important interaction. For example, in a group that changes subjects whenever conflict surfaces, members likely share the attitude that conflict is too dangerous to address. Leaders who identify norms that hinder group interaction can identify objectives for their interventions.

Because most norms develop through indirect negotiation, conversation about what members should or should not do is rare; thus, new norms often evolve before leaders are even aware of them. Fortunately, alert leaders can identify a norm when it is broken. A number of interactions indicate that a norm has been broken. Most often, when leaders observe members correcting each other’s behavior (e.g., “Irwin, own that statement.”), it indicates that a group norm has been broken. Other ways
that group members will respond to a member breaking a norm include challenges (e.g., “Gerald, you can give better feedback than that.”), criticisms (e.g., “That’s so insensitive. You really don’t care about getting along.”), and angry reactions (e.g., “Shut up, you jerk! You don’t belong here!”).

By observing the strength of a group’s reaction to the “norm violation,” leaders can judge a norm’s importance. The following situation demonstrates how members might react to the breaking of an important group norm.

**SUE:** “Ted, I can’t believe you said that. That’s not the way we’re supposed to talk in here.”

**WANDA:** “I’m really offended by that, too. I hope you never attack me like that.”

**TED:** “Wow! I really feel like I’ve broken some kind of rule in here and you all want to punish me. I was only being honest!”

**HARRY:** “You’d think by now, Ted, you’d know how we’re supposed to get along. I’m not sure I ever want you to talk with me like that.”

**JANE:** “I’m not sure this group is for you. Have you thought about taking care of your problem somewhere else?”

A strong reaction to a norm violation indicates that members believe that the behaviors defined by the norm are important. By observing the norms that members require each other to obey, leaders can gain insight into members’ apprehensions about participation. Once identified, these apprehensions should be explored. For example, when the norm “anger will not be expressed” is stringently enforced, members will vigorously correct, challenge, or criticize those who express anger or who attempt to discuss sharing anger. Leaders who observe a group enforcing rigid norms about expressing anger can assume that members have fears about expressing anger and should explore those fears.

When leaders observe members working hard to maintain a norm, they should also expect members to resist changing that norm. This is because members attempt to maintain norms that will protect them from the anxiety associated with being involved in experiences they perceive as risky. In general, the harder members fight to maintain a norm, the more difficult it will be to change that norm. Chapter 14 includes a discussion of intervention strategies designed to address norms that block group progress and to form productive norms.

**The Formation of Norms.** Norms are the products of negotiations that involve members influencing one another. When members are uncomfortable with a certain behavior, their shared reactions establish the inappropriateness of that behavior. For example, a member may express anger toward another member. In response to this expression, some group members might show their discomfort, whereas others may discuss how “negative” feelings have been damaging in their personal relationships. Thus, without any specific mention of group rules, the development of a norm commences. The following interaction depicts this process.

**ARTHUR:** “Jim, I’m really angry with you! You can’t say that!”

**LUCY:** “Arthur, you’re so judgmental!”

**JIM:** “You really hurt my feelings. That kind of talk is not helpful for me!”
SUE: “You are just like my first husband. His anger was so destructive. It never did anyone any good.”

LIZ: “Your anger has really got me upset. I don’t think this is the place for that kind of emotion.”

LUCY: “Yeah, I thought we were going to be here to help each other. I’m really upset.”

These reactions begin to establish the norm that expressing anger is unacceptable. Conversely, when members admire a behavior, their reactions will establish the acceptability of that behavior. For example, after a member shares fears about confronting another member, the others share how impressed they are by this sharing. Consequently, the norm that expressing fears is appropriate begins to be established.

ARTHUR: [Tears in his eyes] “Rita, I really want to share how I feel about you. I can’t; I’m so scared you’ll hate me. I just want you to care about me.”

LIZ: “I’m really moved by what you’ve said, Arthur. That took a lot of courage.”

RITA: “Arthur, I never wanted to hurt you. I feel so close to you now.”

ARTHUR: “This is the first time I ever experienced anything like this. I guess I was scared because I thought I was going to get hurt, but I wasn’t. I’m so relieved.”

SUE: “This is so incredible. I feel like I can talk about my fears, you know, what scares me, and that’s okay.”

These examples illustrate how indirect negotiation forms group norms. Norms form when members’ negotiations result in a consistent pattern of group behavior. This process is most notable in a newly formed group, where norms are unclear and members are uncertain how to behave.

Sherif (1936) described the reciprocal influence process of norm development as a funnel pattern. When a new group begins, members use the behaviors they ordinarily use in social situations when they are unacquainted with what is expected. Over time, based on members’ reactions to each other and the interventions of the leader, the variability of members’ interactive behaviors decreases. After a while, members’ behaviors begin to conform. At the point where “members align their behaviors until they match certain standards” (Forsyth, 1999, p. 121), norms have developed (see Figure 2.1).

The following scenario illustrates norm development during a group’s first two sessions. During the early moments of the first session, members are engaged in a discussion about their families, their job situations, and the current weather conditions. Members interact spontaneously and shift from topic to topic; often several members talk at once and laugh nervously. The group leader intervenes by sharing some ideas about how the group can interact most effectively. The leader’s suggestions include listening to each other and staying with a topic as long as it is productive. Some members use these suggestions, whereas others continue to interact as they had earlier. By the end of the session, after several leader interventions, members begin to be more attentive, talking one at a time and staying with a topic for longer periods.
The second session begins with the same interaction patterns as the first meeting, but this does not last long. Without the leader saying anything, members stop their customary social interactions and focus on being in the group; a period of silence ensues. After a moment, a member talks, without interruption, about a relationship problem while others listen attentively. At the end of the member’s sharing, other members take turns offering their ideas on how to solve the problem. Eventually, discussion drifts as others share experiences with relationship problems. Occasionally, a member interrupts, but others remind that member to wait until the current speaker has finished.

In this example, group behaviors became less variable. The group rapidly established the norm of one speaker at a time. Interaction began to conform to a standard of behavior, and the group committed to enforcing the standard. In addition, it appears that the group made progress in developing a “staying on the topic” norm. Although the member did not resolve the problem, the group stayed focused on relationship concerns.

By being aware of how norms are formed, leaders can encourage the inclusion of effective group behaviors and the exclusion of counterproductive behaviors. Clearly, the development of productive norms is most easily accomplished during the process of norm formation. To change a norm, the leader must identify the norm, obstruct its use, and replace it with a more productive norm (see chapter 13).

**Obstructing Norms.** Obstructing norms support behaviors that are inconsistent with group objectives. These behaviors develop tension among members, create a risky environment, and encourage defensiveness. Obstructing norms include behaviors such as criticizing, denying feelings, talking about events external to the group, avoiding responsibility for personal reactions, assuming motivations behind others’ behaviors, demanding conformity, and engaging in competitive interactions. They emerge during early phases of group interaction because members fear being
hurt. For example, members might negotiate norms that support withholding emotions, changing topics when conflict emerges, or discussing events external to the group. Members' worst fears become realities when they cannot address their concerns without breaking a norm developed to protect themselves. Members who share feelings and concerns risk the criticism of others for breaking the group's norms.

Consequently, obstructing norms discourage openness, honesty, creativity, risk taking, and experimentation with new behaviors. A group that operates with obstructing norms is unlikely to provide members with productive experiences.

Example 1 demonstrates the presence of obstructing norms: "criticize those who do not conform to group norms" and "do not disclose negative feelings." In Example 2, members are using the norms "topic changing" and "avoid responsibility for personal opinions." Continuation of the norms in both examples paints a grim picture for the future of these groups. The first example involves a scenario where an obstructing norm is broken; the second demonstrates a group conforming to its obstructing norms.

**Example 1**

**URSULA:** "Linda, why can’t you just get along and stop being so nasty! You’re so defensive and hostile!"

**LIZ:** "Yeah, Linda, when you’re angry like that, it doesn’t work for me. You seem to have some real problems!"

**JEFF:** "If you were more agreeable, the group would be better for all of us."

**LINDA:** "I’m really upset that I’m angry and can’t share it."

**URSULA:** "Listen, Linda, if you want to get along, you’ll need to stay positive. Why can’t you understand that?"

**Example 2**

**JESSE:** "You just can’t imagine how I was treated in that store."

**PHIL:** "We are really getting somewhere in here. This is great."

**SUE:** "Phil, you know how important it is that we continue to progress the way we have."

**JESSE:** "Did you all see the news last night?"

**PHIL:** "I’m really tired of how they cover the same story over and over again."

**LUCILLE:** "It’s supposed to be warm tomorrow."

**Helping Norms.** Helping norms encourage members to use behaviors that help members meet their group counseling and therapy objectives. Generally, helping norms contribute to a facilitative group environment where members can self-disclose without fear of criticism, trust others to act in their best interest, and be confident that their concerns and feelings will be respected.

Behaviors indicative of helping norms include sharing and exploring emotions, working with a member’s concern as long as it is productive, interacting in the here
and now, being responsible for personal opinions and reactions, checking for understanding, accepting negative feelings, openly addressing conflict, and observing and discussing group process. These behaviors, along with the shared attitudes of respect and acceptance, result in a group environment that promotes the growth and change of members.

Groups often have trouble establishing group norms even though they reduce many of the anxieties associated with group membership. This is because helping norms are inconsistent with the way individuals customarily interact. To develop helping norms, leaders ask members to exchange customary social behaviors for more risky modes of interaction. For example, customary social interaction does not involve giving feedback, confronting, or sharing immediate feelings and reactions. Leaders should be aware that members need to be convinced that the behaviors associated with helping norms actually do work before they can become norms.

The following examples demonstrate the presence of helping norms. In Example 1, members are reacting to a member breaking a valued helping norm: “use responsible language.” In Example 2, members are conforming to two helping norms: “paraphrase for understanding” and “stay in the here and now.” These norms suggest that both groups are becoming productive learning environments.

**Example 1**

**JOHN:** “You just get so angry when you don’t get your way.”

**JESSE:** “Are you saying that’s your reaction to me?”

**JOHN:** “I’m not going to talk to you about it.”

**RICHARD:** “John, it seems to me that you are the angry one here, but you won’t admit it!”

**LINDA:** “I’m experiencing you as really hard to get to know. I don’t know how you feel or what you think. I feel shut out by you!”

**RICHARD:** “Why don’t you just say how you feel for a change? I tried it, and it worked for me.”

**JOHN:** “Okay, I get your point. I am angry. I’m angry that none of you seem to be getting to know me. I’m sorry, Jesse, what you said really hit home! It’s what I’ve been struggling with in here and at home and work.”

**Example 2**

**DIANE:** “I’m reacting to what you just said to me, Rick. Are you saying that I put you off because of the way I look at you and that you perceive me as angry?”

**RICK:** “I’m scared now. But, yes, I feel intimidated right now. I feel like you’ll hurt me. Your brow is furrowed, your voice is raised, your fists are clenched, and you’re staring at me.”

**JULIE:** “Diane, I agree with Rick. I’m perceiving you as angry, and I’m feeling like I want to back away from you. I’m scared now, too. Most of it has to do with the way you’re looking and the volume of your voice.”
NANCY: “Diane, I'd find you easier to approach if you would relax your face and hands and talk in a softer voice.”

DIANE: “So I’m putting all of you off, scaring you, because of the loudness of my voice and the expression on my face?”

ALL: “Yes!”

Summary. Norms are a significant determinant of a group’s therapeutic effectiveness. Most norms are established covertly through indirect negotiation. The norms that emerge in a group reflect members’ shared attitudes about participation. Members, especially during early group meetings, usually consider the norms necessary for effective interaction very risky and will attempt to develop norms that provide safety. Once group members experience the value of effective group interaction and begin to associate interpersonal anxiety with potential learning opportunities, the behaviors associated with helping norms will be established.

Roles

Roles, like norms, are a group structural property. Whereas norms are the behaviors expected of all group members, roles are the unique behaviors group members expect from an individual member. As groups form, they become social systems composed of member roles. Member roles develop so that the group can meet the needs of its members; this means that each member will behave differently to perform necessary functions. This is important to remember, as members do not always appear to be acting in a way that helps members meet their needs when in fact they are.

Role Development. Groups become social systems very rapidly. Even as members form initial impressions of each other, they establish expectations for the roles each other will fill. Wheelan (1994) discusses how members’ roles develop during the initial stages of a group:

Role assignment . . . is not entirely the product of rational assessment of each member's skills and talents. Rather, it is based on first impressions, external status, and initial self-presentation as well as the group's needs at the moment. Members may or may not secure a role that will facilitate group goal achievement. On an individual level, a member may find him- or herself in a role that is comfortable and allows for positive contribution to group effort. On the other hand, the member may find his or her assigned role inhibiting and unfamiliar. (p. 57)

Wheelan (1994) makes several other key points group leaders need to understand. First, roles form covertly. Members seldom discuss which member will fill a particular role. Second, members are not initially aware that they are assuming a role assigned to them by other group members. Finally, roles develop early in the life of the group and are difficult to change.

When groups form, members are concerned about what they and others will be doing in the group. Members will ponder role questions such as “What will others want from me?,” “What should I expect from others?,” and “What am I supposed to do?” Ultimately, the reactions of other members to their behaviors determine the
roles members assume—an indirect negotiation process. Although members seek and desire a role that meets their needs and is acceptable to them, they will enact roles on the basis of the expectations communicated by others in their interactions with them. Even members who enact roles that employ behaviors that receive a negative response in the group are responding to the expectations of other members. Wheelan (1994) states,

> The power of social roles to influence the behavior and attitudes of both the role occupant and others viewing the role should not be underestimated. Roles shape attitudes and behavior. Once a person assumes a role, the role creates a new mental perspective in the individual. (p. 56)

Direct negotiation of roles occurs only when members and leaders openly discuss the performance of a group function or when a leader intervenes to modify the role of a particular member. Examples of direct negotiation include members agreeing on who will be responsible for keeping the group on task or for making sure that members are seated and ready to start the group on time or the leader asking a particular member to monitor the expression of emotions in feedback exchange.

**Role Types.** The roles that members assume have been classified and defined in terms of specific member behaviors (e.g., Benne & Sheats, 1948; MacKenzie, 1990). MacKenzie (1990) offers a role typology that views roles as a part of a group’s social system. He believes that members must perform four complementary roles for a group to be therapeutically viable: sociable, structural, divergent, and cautionary roles. Any number of members can fill these roles, and the performance of each of these roles facilitates or inhibits group effectiveness.

**Sociable roles** (MacKenzie, 1990) are filled by members who share emotion, develop positive interpersonal relationships, involve others in interactions, and care about others. These roles are necessary if the group is to develop a safe and facilitative group climate. Members who fill sociable roles try to ensure that all members have positive relationships. However, extreme forms of sociable role behaviors block the expression of anger, confrontation, and discussion of member conflicts.

**Structural roles** (MacKenzie, 1990) are filled by members who attend to group organization so that the group can provide effective learning experiences. Structural role behaviors are concerned with meeting goals and achieving positive outcomes. Structural role behaviors, such as asking for guidelines or clarifying procedures, help members develop an understanding of group process and reduce the anxiety associated with the ambiguity of group interaction. Members who fill this role tend to be cognitive and push for structure. In their extreme, structural role behaviors block the expression of emotion and retard spontaneous interaction.

MacKenzie (1990) characterizes members who fill **divergent roles** as continuously challenging others and expressing points of view that differ from others. Members perceive those who fill divergent roles as hostile and critical. Because of the antagonistic attitudes displayed by these members, others face the challenge of having to clarify their own perspectives and learn how to accept divergent points of view. In addition, these members make the positive contribution of introducing the expression of anger into group interaction. Extreme forms of divergent role behav-
iors have a harmful effect on group interaction. When unsuccessfully managed, divergent members’ behaviors cause groups to polarize around issues and experience unresolved hostile feelings.

Cautionary roles (MacKenzie, 1990) are demonstrated by members who withhold personal information. When cautionary members join groups, they are apprehensive and often withdraw from interaction. The reluctant involvement of cautionary members forces other members to examine their commitment to the group and willingness to self-disclose. Members who fill cautionary roles usually frustrate other members’ efforts to involve them in group interaction. Cautionary members also force other group members to deal with their concerns about being unacceptable. In extreme cases, cautionary role behaviors increase other members’ apprehensions about self-disclosing in the group. If interventions do not succeed, cautionary role behaviors threaten group cohesion.

MacKenzie believes that these four roles, each with positive and negative manifestations, are essential. It is important for leaders to remember that all roles, no matter how they are perceived, can be used for the benefit of group members. Only extreme role behaviors have a seriously negative impact on a group. A group social system that includes these roles has a structure that allows it to confront the essential interpersonal issues associated with these roles.

Role Performance. The performance of any role ranges in its impact on group interaction. Members who perform roles that improve interpersonal communication and contribute to establishing helping norms are needed for a group to become an effective learning environment. Examples of facilitative role performance for each of MacKenzie’s (1990) role types show how each role can make an important contribution to group effectiveness.

Facilitative Sociable Role: “Art, you’re the only one who hasn’t shared your feelings with Steve. I hope you’ll do it.”

Facilitative Structural Role: “Bill, you got a bunch of feedback. Do you understand what Holly said to you?”

Facilitative Divergent Role: “Why do we always have to agree on everything? I don’t agree, and I think my point of view is just as valid as yours!”

Facilitative Cautionary Role: “Just because other people want me to share all my feelings doesn’t mean I have to!”

Roles may also hinder group progress. Hindering role performance serves the agenda of individual members at the group’s expense. The performance of these roles ordinarily includes ineffective behaviors developed to satisfy interpersonal needs in family-of-origin and social environments. Hindering role performance has the consequence of diverting other members from productive interactions. Examples of role performance for each of MacKenzie’s (1990) role types show the enactment of roles that hinder group effectiveness.

Hindering Sociable Role: “There seems to be a lot of negative feelings in here. We need to stop this and focus on the good things that are going on in the group.”
Hindering Structural Role: “As the leader of the group, aren’t you supposed to tell us what to do now? Some people have shared emotions, and that doesn’t work! What exactly is the procedure?”

Hindering Divergent Role: “It’s all your fault; you’ve just succeeded in getting us all upset. Where did you learn how to lead groups?”

Hindering Cautionary Role: Silence.

Some members play roles that help other group members meet their needs for safety and threaten group effectiveness. Avoidant role performance helps members avoid confronting their shared apprehensions. Individuals in sociable, structural, cautionary, and divergent roles can enact their roles as avoidant role performers. For example, when a member performs an avoidant divergent role, he or she is likely to be the only member who shares anger. This member performs a role that serves the purpose of helping others who have difficulty expressing anger avoid having to express it. The following dialogue demonstrates this process.

WALLY: “Ryan, I’m really angry! How dare you!”
HAYDEN: “Wally, I’m sure you’re not really angry; it’s just a misunderstanding. Anger doesn’t help.”
LAURA: “That’s right, Wally. I’m sure if you would just listen to what Ryan is saying, you wouldn’t be angry. Your anger is not useful.”
RON: “Wally, I’m really uncomfortable with how you continue to be angry. It’s like you’re ready to throw a chair or something. You just don’t know how to get along!”
LAURA: “If you would just try to understand what Ryan is saying, you wouldn’t have to be angry. You always seem angry!”
BOB: “Wally, what’s your problem? Can’t you control yourself?”

This illustration shows how group members deal with their fears about anger by confronting an individual whose role involves expressing anger. Instead of talking about their fears, group members use an avoidant role performer as a means to escape dealing directly with their concerns. This process involves members criticizing the member in the avoidant role for unacceptable behavior instead of directly discussing their fears. If this process continues, it has the effect of establishing norms that preclude the enactment or discussion of the behaviors members’ fear. When these norms are established, members avoid confronting the fears that lead to their becoming group members.

Filling any role as an avoidant role performer can be very difficult because no matter what a member does, he or she will continue to represent the fears that other members want to avoid. When members persist in labeling a member as a problem, that member’s behaviors and the group’s avoidance of a shared fear will continue. Leaders should be aware that a member who fills any role as an avoidant role performer is in danger of becoming a scapegoat. Later chapters discuss the process of scapegoating and leader interventions that address scapegoating.

Leaders can differentiate hindering and avoidant role performance by examining how a role affects the group. If members are dealing with interpersonal fears and a member diverts the group’s attention to him or her, that member is performing a
Chapter Two  The Interactive Group Environment

Table 2.1
Facilitative, Hindering, and Avoiding Dimensions of MacKenzie’s (1990) Group Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitative</th>
<th>Hindering</th>
<th>Avoiding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociable roles</td>
<td></td>
<td>A member who persistently blocks interactions that include conflict and “negative” emotions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports and encourages the expression of emotions and caring. Is sensitive to the feelings and needs of other members.</td>
<td>Attempts to suppress the expression of “negative” emotions and conflict. Stresses the importance of “being nice.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural roles</td>
<td>Organizes and clarifies group processes in order to help the group meet its goals and function effectively.</td>
<td>Pushes to establish structure and firm procedures. Attempts to maintain cognitive interaction and suppress spontaneity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergent roles</td>
<td>Challenges members to clarify perspectives and examine group interaction from different viewpoints. Introduces the expression of anger and confronting conflict.</td>
<td>Polarizes the group around conflicts by frequently challenging or “finding fault” with group processes and objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cautionary roles</td>
<td>Helps members examine their commitment to the group and anxieties associated with acceptance and self-disclosure because of their reluctance and apprehensions about participation.</td>
<td>Withholds personal reactions and threatens group safety because of their hesitancy. Is ambivalent when others attempt to involve him or her.</td>
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hindering role. If the group has a strong reaction to a member’s behavior, avoids dealing with their own reactions to the issues that member presents, and criticizes that member for the behavior, that member is performing an avoidant role. By differentiating avoidant and hindering roles, leaders can intervene more effectively. Chapter 14 discusses leader interventions that address these role issues. Table 2.1 depicts how each of MacKenzie’s (1990) roles can involve facilitative, hindering, or avoidant characteristics.

**Role Problems.** When members do not perform the behaviors expected of their role, other members will respond. These responses involve exerting pressure on the member who is not behaving as expected to perform expected behaviors. The pressure to perform a role can cause members to struggle with participating in a personally congruent manner. The following are some common scenarios.

Martha is expected to offer spontaneous opinions. She has the latitude to offer opinions in a personally congruent way as long as she offers opinions—quickly. When she decides not to offer opinions because she
wants to experiment with being more reflective, other group members pressure her to offer opinions. Some members ask her for her opinions, and others confront her, saying that they feel rejected by her because she is withholding her ideas.

When the group begins, John tries to act according to how he perceives himself—caring and emotionally sensitive. Ideally, others would support his acting this way, but this is not the case. Other members persistently try to influence him to angrily confront those members who break the group’s norms.

The group has been meeting for several months. Recently, Scott has become progressively annoyed about other members’ reactions to him. He shares his anger: “I thought we were supposed to be honest and care about each other! But every time I’m honest and show I care, I get criticized. Some of you seem to want me to go away.”

During the group’s third session, Sally makes an emotionally charged statement: “What the h— am I supposed to do! I can’t figure it out. All I know is that whatever I do, it’s not what I’m supposed to do!”

These scenarios are indicative of the pressures members experience finding and filling their roles. When these pressures are vague or conflicting, they create role problems. Forsyth (1999) describes these problems as role stress, of which he describes two basic categories: role ambiguity, which is the outcome of ambiguous role expectations, and role conflict, which is the product of conflicting expectations for a role or conflicts between the various roles a member may fill inside and outside the group.

**Role Ambiguity.** Role ambiguity occurs when members are uncertain what they are supposed to do or doubt whether they are capable of doing what is expected of them (Forsyth, 1999). Role ambiguity is also related to Gladding’s (1995) description of role confusion, which depicts members who do not understand what they are supposed to do. Role ambiguity and role confusion often occur in newly formed groups or when new members enter an ongoing group. These role issues are common in the early stages of group development.

**Role Conflict.** Role conflict occurs when members experience incompatible role expectations (Forsyth, 1999). Intrarole conflict arises when members are expected to perform a role that involves seemingly incompatible behaviors. For example, a member who is expected to provide support and at the same time confront others experiences intrarole conflict. Intrarole conflicts also emerge when other members expect different behaviors from a particular member.

Interrole conflicts emerge when members struggle with roles that are inconsistent with their self-image and the roles they normally perform. Gladding (1995) uses the term role incompatibility to describe this aspect of role conflict. He states, “In role incompatibility a person is given a role within the group . . . that he or she neither wants nor is comfortable exercising” (p. 38). Members who are influenced to act in unfamiliar ways commonly experience interrole conflict. In some cases, mem-
members experiencing interrole conflicts are making productive changes in their interpersonal behaviors. For example, a member who fills the role of the listener in the group and never listens at home experiences interrole conflict. Occasionally, however, interrole conflict involves members filling roles that do not include productive behaviors (e.g., interrupting those who express emotions). The group leader needs to decide when it is necessary to support or challenge the roles performed by members experiencing interrole conflicts.

Leaders who understand the significance of roles and role problems have a means to conceptualize the behavior patterns of each group member in the context of the group social system. Remember that members are always responding in some way to the expectations of other members. In addition, roles are parts of a group’s social system, a product of negotiation. Clearly, leaders should consider these dynamics when they intervene to help members change their roles.

Roles in Effectively Functioning Groups. In general, members must enact a variety of roles in order to bring essential group issues to the surface. A group where all members are performing sociable roles (MacKenzie, 1990) will not be as effective as a group where members also enact structural, cautionary, and divergent roles (MacKenzie, 1990). Groups will stall when they do not have members who create interactive issues. This is because the interactions of apparently “difficult” members cause other members to address their own concerns.

In a productive group experience, members learn to develop the flexibility to enact a range of roles that will work effectively in a wide range of relationships. To do so, members need to develop comfort and competence with a range of relationship skills. Groups that encourage experimentation with new behaviors have norms that allow members to experiment with alternative roles.

Summary. Each member’s role is necessary for the continuation of the group’s social system. This does not mean that the group operates effectively. Rather, it means that the social system created through group members’ negotiations persists. The implication is that the roles that form the structure of the group’s social system can support or block a group in accomplishing its purposes.

When members chastise a member for acting “inappropriately,” the leader should carefully examine what is occurring. A member who does not perform according to role expectations threatens the continuation of the group’s social system. On observing a group attempting to force a member into a role, leaders should ask themselves, “What purpose does this role serve for the group?” It is highly probable that a member’s inappropriate behavior is consistent with a concern that the other members want to avoid.

Leaders should understand that a group that keeps a member in a particular role might hinder the progress of the member and the group. The leader must intervene if the expectations of members are keeping a member in a role that does not allow growth. At the same time, the leader should be cognizant that a group that keeps a member in a role sustains the status quo in the group social system. Defining this status quo is an important diagnostic step in understanding a group’s functioning.
MEMBERSHIP ATTITUDES

The norms and roles members negotiate and attempt to sustain represent their attitudes about participation. These attitudes bring about opportunities for learning and changing and shape the social structure and effectiveness of group environments. Leaders should understand that a systemic relationship exists between effective participation attitudes and facilitative norms and roles. Norms and roles influence members’ attitudes while, at the same time, members’ attitudes influence group norms and roles they attempt to negotiate. A group will be effective when it develops norms and roles that support essential member attitudes and when members’ attitudes support facilitative norms and roles.

Members value participation when they experience a group structure that supports interaction that leads to productive change. Once developed, attitudes that value participation lead members to become more actively involved and committed to group participation. Conversely, members who have not had productive experiences will display attitudes that question the value of participation. This skepticism is usually associated with norms and roles that do not support interactions that allow interpersonal learning. The longer a group structure persists that does not support interpersonal learning, the more likely it is that members will begin to regard the group as a waste of time and honest participation as excessively risky. To reverse this skepticism, members must experience what it is like to experience productive group interactions.

As leaders work to develop a social structure that creates an effective group environment, they should be cognizant of a number of essential member attitudes. Leaders who are able to help members develop these attitudes are more likely to develop an effective interactive group environment. These attitudes include members’ beliefs about the potential outcomes of participation, personal responsibility for learning, the usefulness of risk taking, and commitment to learning from one another. It is also important that the attitudes leaders demonstrate are consistent with the attitudes they attempt to develop in members.

Participation

Participation that is based on a shared commitment to personal learning and the learning of others is a hallmark of an effective group environment. Participation attitudes describe members’ beliefs about the potential benefits of participation. Members will believe in the benefits of participation when they observe or personally experience productive learning. Because of these observations and experiences, members develop participation attitudes that lead to greater investment in group participation. For instance, when members observe another member learning to communicate more effectively, the entire group observes productive learning. Consequently, members experience the group as an effective learning environment and understand the value of participation.

Members will be successful when they believe that participation will benefit them and they act on this attitude. The emerging attitude that participation is worth-
while eventually develops group norms and roles that support the importance of participation. In turn, norms and roles that support the importance of participation further develop attitudes that the group is meaningful and important for its members. On the other hand, when members question the value of participation, they create an environment that is less likely to develop norms and roles that support productive learning experiences. If most of a group’s membership shares this attitude, the group is boring and unproductive.

### Personal Responsibility

Members who act on the attitude that they are personally responsible for their own learning will have productive group experiences. During the initial stages of a group, however, members are unclear regarding how to learn. Members often expect the leader to provide specific instructions or the answers to their concerns. Initially, most members balk at the prospect of being personally responsible, wanting the leader to be in charge. These members may also have no idea what to do to be responsible for their learning.

Once members understand that learning depends on the choices they make about their participation, they comprehend what it means to be responsible for their own learning. Members who comprehend this actively self-disclose, participate in feedback exchange, and experiment with new behaviors. Members who persist in the fantasy that the leader knows what each member needs to learn are not likely to benefit from their experience in an interactive group.

### Risk Taking

As group members develop attitudes that value participation and personal responsibility for learning, risk taking increases. Risk taking means that members choose to participate despite their anxiety. Members who take risks choose to disclose, offer feedback, or experiment with behaviors in ways that challenge what they believe they need to do to be safe or acceptable to others.

Members’ uncertainty about the way others might respond and their needs for acceptance when taking a risk influence the amount of anxiety they experience. Members who are very uncertain about the outcome of the risk they take and believe that their participation could lead to rejection take a major risk. Conversely, persons who are more certain that the risk they take will have a positive outcome face a less threatening risk and less anxiety. The greater the uncertainty, the greater the anxiety.

Groups that have norms and roles that support risk taking as an essential aspect of participation become exciting environments for learning and change. Because members must first learn to tolerate the anxiety associated with taking risks, the belief that risk taking is desirable is not easily developed. As members confront their fears and learn that risk taking can lead to important learning, they reframe the anxiety associated with risk taking as excitement.
Commitment to Others’ Learning

Members of groups that are especially productive share the attitude that being committed to the learning of others is extremely important. This shared commitment is the outcome of observing and experiencing interpersonal learning. When members learn productively from each other and understand that they rely on each other for learning, they develop norms and roles that support collaborative learning.

Leader and Member Attitudes

The development of essential member attitudes is necessary if a group is to be an effective learning environment. Achieving these attitudes is unlikely when leaders’ attitudes are inconsistent with the attitudes they attempt to develop. Leaders who act congruently on the beliefs that participation leads to learning, that personal responsibility for learning is essential, that risk taking leads to growth, and that collaborative learning is critical will communicate attitudes that lead to the development of a powerful learning environment. Leaders who have not experienced the impact of this form of interpersonal learning or who doubt members can learn from each other will not communicate these attitudes effectively.

CONCLUSION

The effective interactive group environment is one where members interact openly and honestly. For this to happen, a group must have a social structure that encourages interpersonal learning. Groups that have norms and roles that encourage members to accept personal responsibility, believe in active participation, commit to collaborative learning, and value risk taking are powerful learning environments.