



Systems-centered large groups

Systeemgerichte grote groepen gebruiken functionele onderverdeling in subgroepen om verschillen te onderscheiden en te integreren, wat bijdraagt aan de ontwikkeling van het groepssysteem. De Amerikaanse psycholoog Susan Gantt legt uit welke theorieën daaraan ten grondslag liggen en betoogt dat de methode zou kunnen bijdragen aan een betere, minder verdeelde wereld. Ze is voorzitter van de Systems-Centered Training (SCT) and Research Institute in de VS en consultant bij SCT-NL. Dit artikel is eerder verschenen in *Group Circle*, de nieuwsbrief van de APGA.

Door Susan Gantt

In response to the pandemic, a systems-centered® large group began meeting monthly on Zoom. In our first meeting, members were asked to name their anxiety-provoking thoughts. As each thought was spoken, someone resonating paraphrased the person's message and then added their own anxiety-provoking thought, which was paraphrased. Using this method of functional subgrouping (Agazarian, 1997) ensured that each person was understood, both personally and as a voice for a subgroup of the large group. Functional subgrouping supports our nervous system preference for co-regulating with others (Badenoch, 2017), building a here-and-now connection, activating the ventral vagal nervous system as an alternative to the sympathetic activation most common in anxiety, and in doing so, containing the anxiety in the co-regulating subgroup systems (Gantt, 2018). Members' nervous systems began to settle. Others then voiced the negative prediction that hearing all these anxiety-provoking thoughts would make it worse, yet by the end of the meeting, the whole large group reported less anxiety and being more able to hold all the unknowns together, and by reality-testing the negative predictions, it had taken a step to lower the pull to flight that every new group has.

Systems-centered large groups use functional subgrouping to discriminate and integrate differences that develops the

group system. This implements systems-centered theory: that living human systems survive, develop and transform through the process of discriminating and integrating differences. Differences, often challenging for human beings, are essential resources for large group development and transformation.

Seeing the group system that shapes the people

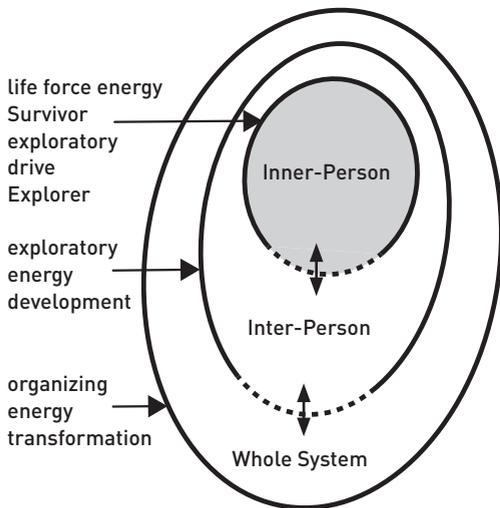
Applying general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1968) to groups, Agazarian (1997) developed a theory of living human systems (TLHS) and its application in systems-centered therapy and training (SCT). TLHS defines a hierarchy of isomorphic systems.

The basic SCT hierarchy is a triad of systems, the smallest of which is our person-as-a-system. Our inner-person system is the source of life force energy and exploratory drive. When collaborating with others, we

contribute our energies to inter-person system goals. In SCT large groups, we subgroup (inter-person) to explore similarities and the emerging differences within the similarities and the similarities within the differences. Exploring group conflicts through subgrouping enables the whole group to integrate its differences and develop and transform its whole system norms (Agazarian, Gantt & Carter, 2021).

All living human systems, small or large, are defined as a triadic hierarchy of isomorphic systems. Isomorphy means similarity for systems in a hierarchy, e.g., when we feel closed boundaries in ourselves (inner-person), there will be a subgroup who also feels closed and some closed boundaries in the whole system. Seeing the large group as a system helps us see how to use our inner-person energies to fuel inter-person subgrouping to integrate differences. The inter-person subgroups (middle system in the hierarchy) influence our inner-person and whole system norms. Whole system norms shape what happens at all system levels.

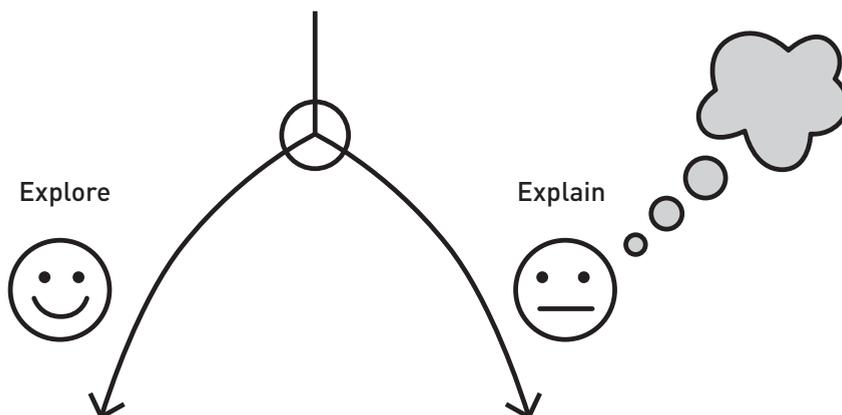
Our Person-as-a-System



Hierarchy of Living Human Systems

Developing group norms

SCT explicitly and deliberately influences group norms by shifting the communication patterns away from social, stereotyped communications to here-and-now explorations and reality-testing. This starts by introducing functional subgrouping to build inter-person systems, ensuring that every communication is understood and joined so that no one is left alone with a difference. Large group norms, whether implicit or explicit, govern what the group can and cannot do. For example, when social or societal



norms are imported into the group, the group will replicate the societal conflicts and fixate more in survival than development goals. Norms can come from our past survivor roles leading us to repeat the past in the present, or the norms of our community groups that leave us tied to past social injustices that are reenacted through implicit norms from our history that impede our development in the present. Changing the social communication patterns enables differences to be more easily discriminated and integrated toward development and shifts the larger group norms more toward development and transformation than fixation in survival. Functional subgrouping contains the differences of group conflicts in separate subgroups so that each side of the conflict can be explored as a voice for the group rather than taking care of differences by institutionalizing them into identified patients or scapegoats, both of which encapsulate differences into stereotypic roles which effectively silences the exploration of differences and truncates development. The overall goal of SCT large groups is to transform the group so that they can discover, and develop the norms that govern the group.

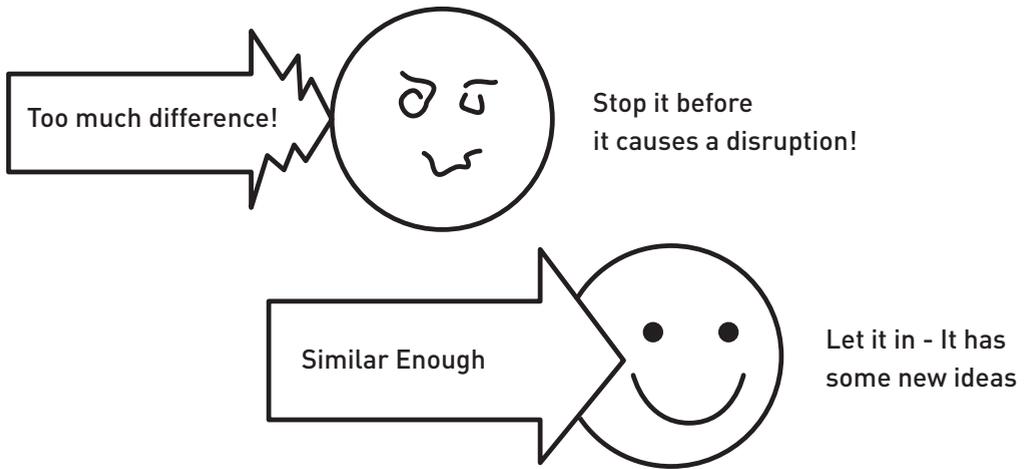
Exploring versus explaining

Exploring is fueled by curiosity from our inner-person system, which opens our boundaries to the unknown where new differences can be discriminated and integrated. Explaining signals closed system boundaries, with low potential for development and high potential for stabilizing in the known and in the past as flight from the present.

Large groups easily stabilize in known explanations, speculations, opinions, stereotypes, or interpretations at the expense of reality-testing and exploring the here-and-now as an isomorphic system of all that has come before and all that can be. Introducing this fork-in-the-road enables groups to explore their experience. Explaining maintains intellectualized flight. Exploring weakens flight and establishes reality-testing.

The social unconscious

Hierarchy and isomorphy are also useful in operationally defining the social unconscious as every living human system exists in the context of a larger system which governs how the systems within it function.



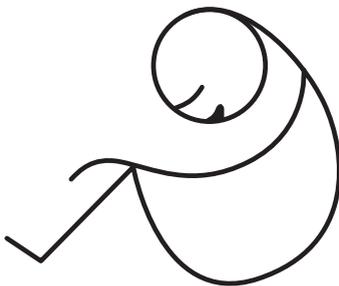
The social unconscious is the implicit and invisible societal norms, the larger system that maintains what has been rather than discovering what can be. Shifting from stereotyping to curiosity potentiates development by opening us, the subgroups and whole group to unknown differences that when we are curious are more likely to be explored and integrated as we discover the implicit social unconscious in the unknown.

Opening and closing to differences

In SCT, though differences are the fuel for

development, our boundaries open more easily to similarities and then in the context of some similarity, to small differences (functional subgrouping).

Getting curious about differences is an important first step toward system development as is interrupting the pull to speculate or prematurely reject untested realities. Development also requires exploring the fight energy aroused by differences rather than enacting fight or discharging it against ourselves or others. Exploring, rather than enacting, our fight energy connects us more fully to our life force.



Whole system goals and norms: the unique potential

The goal of systems-centered large groups is to survive, develop, and transform from simpler to more complex understanding through the process of discriminating and integrating differences. Toward this goal, SCT emphasizes the development and transformation of large group norms. As SCT large groups develop, the potential increases for it to become a unique context for discovering implicit group norms that reveal the social unconscious of the group, or put another way, emerging implicit group norms reveal the whole group survivor role.

Phases of system development

Drawing from Bion (1961) and Bennis and Shepard (1956), SCT defines three phases of system development: authority (with sub-phases of flight, fight, roles/role locks and the crisis of hatred), intimacy, and work. Integrating Lewin's (1951) force field, SCT operationally defines each phase as a force field of driving and restraining forces. Weakening the restraining forces frees driving forces toward the developmental goal of each phase.

Authority phase

In the flight subphase, SCT leaders actively weaken the restraining forces of stereotyped, social subgrouping, and explaining, which maintain flight, enabling the large group to establish two norms: 1) functional subgrouping as an alternative to stereotyped subgrouping and social communications, and 2) exploring instead of explaining. These norms support reality-testing and collecting data in the here-and-now.

In the fight subphase, the developmental work discriminates between enacting fight and exploring the energy and information in frustration, irritation, and anger. The large group can then start to identify the past survivor roles (restraining roles) that are aroused in the group context that compete with their membership roles (driving roles) and whole group goals.

The group is then able to explore its hatred of authority with the leader as the stand-in for all disappointing authority. The group resists exploring its own resistance to change by trying to induce the leader to change instead. Exploring resistance to change is a driving force that leads to discovering how our resistance fuels the very norms in our large groups that we hate (of course, isomorphic to society). Subgrouping to explore hatred is an important fork-in-the-road to our survivor roles where we could only survive in hatred as we did not have the containment to develop through it. The large group context is vital here, as both the leader and whole group contain the hatred until it can be metabolized and used for development and transformation. The leader's role is to stay attuned to the goal of system change and transformation, while holding the authority role with its responsibility for maintaining boundaries, goal clarity and containing the group and its underlying hatred of authority.

Intimacy phase

The large group conflicts in intimacy, similar to Hopper's (2003) fourth basic assumption of incohesion, relate to the repetition of our restraining roles of enchanted and disenchanting as early adaptations to our attachment challenges.

Work phase

This phase is the ongoing developmental work of any living human system to explore and discover what we do not know and use what we discover to take our role in context.

Not just me: shifting from me to we

The conflicts of every living human system reverberate with the challenge of shifting from being just ourselves, mostly related to our inner-person, to being and seeing ourselves as a voice for the whole system. This is where the large group may be most vital as we learn to see when our energy is a voice for the whole group. Shifting from 'just me to us and we' (Agazarian, Gantt & Carter, 2021) enables us to discover how to use ourselves as a voice for group development and transformation. Large groups always arouse these human conflicts between flight into ourselves (inner-person) and away from, or fighting with, inter-personal differences, and opening to the potential of membership (inter-person) with others in the large group continuing to develop and transform the norms that govern us.

The lens of the person-as-a-system is useful again to visualize the boundary we must cross to move from focusing on ourselves

to using our inner-person energy in collaborative goals with others. In the early phases of the group, this entails shifting from explaining ourselves in oft-told stories or discharges or defending ourselves by fighting differences (all inner-person role-systems) into cooperative exploration of similarities and differences with others; this is the work of all SCT large groups. All SCT groups use functional subgrouping to maximize the likelihood of differences being explored and integrated. This lowers the tendency of large groups to scapegoat, silence, or care-take, thereby extruding differences. Increasing the capacity for integrating differences also increases the potential for development and transformation of the large group and its norms and culture.

As a world, we are faced with two pandemics (COVID-19 and racism); we are still in the authority phase, blaming our leaders and resisting changing our roles. This makes developing our large groups essential. As subgroups of the world, large groups develop by integrating differences, fueling the potential of the world, to developing and transforming their norms, essential for our ongoing survival, development, and transformation as a world. ■

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Refereren aan:

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