

HISTORY OF GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY: BACKGROUND, STARTUP AND DEVELOPMENT

HISTORIA DE LA PSICOTERAPIA DE GRUPO: ANTECEDENTES, INICIO Y DESARROLLO

Guillermo Gil Escudero

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2950-4379>

Doctor in Psychology. Individual and Group Psychotherapist. Spain

Mónica Rodríguez-Zafra

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2609-0609>

Lecturer at the Faculty of Psychology.

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED). Spain

This article was published in Spanish. This is the English version (Extended Summary)

Link to the Spanish version: <https://doi.org/10.33898/rdp.v33i121.1116>

How to reference this article:

Gil Escudero, G. y Rodríguez-Zafra, M. (2022). Historia de la psicoterapia de grupo: Antecedentes, inicio y desarrollo [History of group psychotherapy: Background, startup and development]. *Revista de Psicoterapia*, 33(121), 7-26. <https://doi.org/10.33898/rdp.v33i121.1116>

Extended Summary

Background: The discovery of group therapy as a therapeutic modality

Around 1905, the physician Joseph H. Pratt introduced a therapeutic system of classes in groups for the treatment of tuberculosis patients without resources to face an internal treatment in medical sanatoriums. These groups had an educational and psychological support nature in which formal classes were given weekly, which included rules of food, hygiene, rest, sleep and lifestyle, followed by group comments and the analysis of behavioral records of various kinds, for example, from outdoor activities and weight gain. During the following decades, this type of group psychotherapeutic care changed its focus of attention, placing less and less emphasis on the physical aspects of diseases and increasing the emphasis on emotions and their influence on somatic diseases, as well as on the diseases. psychological aspects of the groups and in the interaction between the members of each group. For Pratt, group treatment became the most important therapeutic element, at the same time that it expanded its use to patients with other medical ailments, including also psychiatric patients, given the notable improvement in the emotional state of the patients.

Received: December 30, 2021. Accepted: January 3, 2022.

Correspondence:

E-mail: mrodriguez@psi.uned.es

Postal address: Facultad de Psicología. UNED. c/ Juan del Rosal, 10. 28040. Madrid. Spain

© 2022 Revista de Psicoterapia



Pratt's method of group lessons, instructions, and feedback was adopted by other therapists who used it with different populations and made various modifications to it. Pratt's contribution to group psychotherapy consists in having established the first system of continuous psychotherapeutic care in small groups and in having highlighted the importance of several specific aspects of this treatment modality: the influence of some patients on others when becoming in hopeful models, the importance of mutual support and social reinforcement of the achievements of patients, as well as the efficacy of treatment in homogeneous groups in which patients establish a common bond when affected by a common disease or difficulty.

The beginning of the development of group concepts and techniques

In 1914 Jacob Levy Moreno published the first writing on his psychotherapeutic work with groups within the framework of psychodrama (Moreno, 1914) and from 1932 on he introduced the terms "group therapy" and "group psychotherapy". Interactive psychodramatic group work provides a scenic understanding of intrapsychic conflicts that is therapeutic. In his psychodramatic work with groups, he developed a theoretical structure to explain the therapeutic processes that occur in groups, as well as concepts and techniques that will later be used in other approaches to group psychotherapy -role playing, mutual help, interaction in the here and now, facilitation of catharsis, empathic identification, role exchange, etc...-.

The beginnings of group psychodynamic psychotherapy

Burrow, Wender, Schilder and Wolf, began the systematic application of the concepts of individual psychoanalysis to a group context with the aim of social integration. From their perspective, the main unit of analysis is the individual, not the group. They imported the basic psychoanalytic concepts of resistance and transference into group work. For them, the essential therapeutic task in the group is the interpretation to the patient of her attitudes towards the therapist and towards other people in the group. They considered that the most effective and penetrating interpretations were those that connected an emotional reaction present in the group situation with an emotionally significant pattern of interaction with important figures from the past. Within the framework of this theoretical conception, the therapist is unconsciously perceived as a symbolic father and the rest of the group members are perceived as siblings. In this context, the individual overcomes his isolation thanks to interpersonal exchange (Schilder, 1936).

In parallel to the application of group psychotherapy with adult subjects, Laretta Bender and Samuel Slavson (Bender, 1937, Slavson, 1934) initiate its use with children and adolescents with behavior problems, both excessively aggressive and inadequately withdrawn children.

The concept of the group as a whole

In the early 1940s, Kurt Lewin introduced the concept of the group as a whole to the field of group therapy. In the conception of the group as a whole, the psychological situation is constituted by the interaction between the organism and the environment, not by the organism and the environment considered separately.

Kurt Lewin was the initiator and promoter of the movement for the scientific study of groups (Lewin, 1945, 1947) and established the term “group dynamics” to analyze and describe the way in which groups react to changing circumstances. This conceptual emphasis on the group as a whole, with an entity in itself, caused a change in the focus of attention in therapy groups, reorienting the conception of group therapy in such a way that its object goes from being exclusively the individual to let its object be the group itself as a unit. This conception of the group and the therapeutic action in the groups, facilitated the appearance of experiential approaches with groups in which work with groups is conceived as a means to promote the experience and awareness of themselves and of others.

Likewise, Lewin’s conception of the group as a whole had a very relevant influence in the United Kingdom on the work and theoretical framework of S.H. Foulkes, E. James Anthony, Wilfred Bion and H. Ezriel, who considered the group as a whole as a coherent entity in itself, emphasizing the importance of group dynamics, group cohesion and the forces that promote group progress or regression. From this approach in group therapy, attention is paid to interactions in the group, taking into account both what they reveal about each individual patient and group tensions and issues, in such a way that the group process is considered to be the essential healing factor of the treatment, to a greater degree than the interpretations directed towards the psychodynamics of each individual patient. This perspective pays special attention to the problems of individuals related to authority and power, as well as to the basic assumptions that underlie groups, and makes extensive use of the concepts of figure and ground, open system, resonance, reflection, identification and projective identification, understanding that the verbalizations and behaviors of the patients can be understood as attempts to resolve a group conflict that is raised at a preconscious level.

Bion influenced the development of the Tavistock Clinic’s group therapy program, which has been widely criticized for its rigidity and ineffectiveness by many other researchers. On the other hand, Balint, who also adopted the approach of the group as a whole pointed out the importance of the therapeutic relationship between the patient and the therapist as an extremely relevant factor for healing. The contributions of this conception of the group as a whole have been subsequently assumed and integrated into later approaches and theories of group psychotherapy.

The expansion of group psychotherapy

Starting in 1950, there was a significant expansion of group psychotherapy, both the types of groups and populations with which it is used and the theoretical

approaches and perspectives on which they are based were expanded. An important part of this growth was due to the generalization of group psychotherapy in private practice (Grotjahn, 1977) and the application of group therapy to families, children and adolescents.

Additionally, new theoretical and practical approaches with a humanistic orientation exerted a notable influence on group psychotherapy, especially the contributions of Fritz Perls's Gestalt psychotherapy, Carl Rogers' person-centered psychotherapy, and Eric Berne's transactional analysis (1966) and the "marathon" groups.

On the other hand, group psychotherapy was also influenced by the appearance and development of personal development growth groups: the laboratory method, meeting groups, awareness groups and the precursor integration of approaches and techniques carried out by William C. Schutz who paid special attention to non-verbal communication in groups and included, among other techniques, bio-energetic exercises, psychodramatic techniques, rolfing and yoga, in a humanistic framework that combined the contributions of gestalt psychotherapy, of the meeting and awareness groups, and marathon groups.

Integrative group therapy

The rapid growth of the various practices with groups and the lack of clear guidelines for their management and leadership caused a high degree of controversy regarding their use and efficacy and highlighted the need for theoretical concepts typical of group psychotherapy. (Whitaker and Liberman, 1964). Likewise, and due to the need for a solid and stable theoretical and procedural framework for group psychotherapy, interest in scientific research on groups, their characteristics, their functioning and their therapeutic efficacy increased notably.

In 1975, Irvin Yalom publishes his manual "The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy" in which he compiles the relevant information so far on group psychotherapy (Yalom, 1975). Yalom's book thereafter became the basic reference book on the theory and practices of group psychotherapy. Based on the 1975 Yalom manual, a summary is produced that compiles the essential ideas about group therapy (Vinogradov, and Yalom, 1989) and continues to be updated with new editions and versions (Yalom and Leszcz, 2005/2020).

Yalom's work provided the theoretical framework that group psychotherapy needed to establish itself as an established discipline. This theoretical foundation is fundamentally organized around ideas of the healing factors that make group therapy effective, interpersonal learning processes, and group cohesion.

For Yalom, the group's greatest ability to foster change comes from group interaction in the here and now. The group, if structured properly, becomes a social microcosm that represents both the current social environment and the environment of the first significant experiences of patients. Sometimes the group facilitates interpersonal learning, both through the knowledge of the experiences and

experiences of the other members of the group and through their reactions to their own experiences, and promotes the development of corrective emotional experiences, which can be even more important than transference and insight. For this, the group therapist must create an adequate group culture in which interpersonal behaviors are analyzed and a social system is formed thanks to the establishment of the appropriate norms for its operation since attention is paid to the development of group cohesion. Yalom also highlights the importance of feedback between group members that, to be useful, must have a high degree of immediacy, it focuses on the person to whom it responds and in the relationship with it, it is affective in nature, it is not judgmental and may include a degree of self-disclosure.

Through the repetition of experiences in the group therapy situation, patients learn about their interpersonal transactions that are maladaptive and about their distorted perceptions of others that provoke negative responses in other people. The basic mechanisms for this learning to occur are self-observation and feedback from other members of the group (Rutan and Stone, 2005). Likewise, the appropriate balance between emotional elaboration and rational understanding in the context of the group is an especially relevant factor for a profound and significant change in the conceptions, attitudes and behaviors of patients.

Thanks to the integrative contribution of Yalom and the development of other manuals on group psychotherapy, it is now recognized that group psychotherapy is a viable method of psychotherapeutic help to individuals, through multiple types of groups, intervention techniques and orientations theoretical studies, while research on the effectiveness of group experiences and on working with groups continues to be developed.

Finally, in the field of Argentine psychoanalysis and, consequently, also in its main spheres of influence (Latin America and Spain), the proposals of Enrique Pichon-Rivière, centered on his theory of the Operative Group, have had an influence. This theory emphasizes the concepts of dialectical functioning of groups and the relationship between dialectics, homeostasis and cybernetics.