Protagonist selection: the dynamics of choice-making
by Ann E. Hale, M.A., TEP

In your client group you occasionally come across a situation when you suspect that a client is more interested in being the chosen protagonist than in actually working on an issue. The drama is being able to win the choice for protagonist over others who also have expressed a need. What are ways you work with this dynamic? Are there times when â€œsociometric choiceâ€• can be manipulated by group members?

Group norms consist of overt and subtle agreements as group members discover ways to function over time. These agreements may not be entered into evenly by all group members and therefore come up for renewal when established norms begin to conflict with changing needs of the group. The process a group engages in to make choices for extending the focus to individual members may become one of the norms that requires discussion, and certainly in a case where one suspects sociometric choice is beginning to be manipulated by an individual or a clique.

â€œThree sets of polarities confront the group as it encounters and deals with problems of system maintenance. The first has to do with the different and sometimes conflicting demands upon behavior for maintaining the social system of the group and those for maintaining the self-system of the members. The second has to do with the differential demands upon the group for group and member maintenance (comfort) on the one hand , and for group and member change (growth) on the other. The third has to do with the interrelations of authority and freedom in the groupâ€• 1

All three of these polarities come into play as a group makes choices for protagonist or for personal bids for group time and energy (focus). A group may have the norm that all the group members choose and prioritize on whom to focus at a given moment. (Some examples of the criteria on which people are basing their choices may include: (1) â€œwhom in the group are you most focused on?â€•; (2) â€œwhom in the group do you wish to support for group focus as their issue is similar to one you also share?â€• (3) â€œwhom in the group do you choose to have the focus of the group based on their extreme need or sense of urgency?â€• (4) â€œwhom do you choose to support at this moment because they have been patiently waiting and allowing others to go before them?â€• (5) â€œwhom do you choose to support for the focus of the group because the members of your sub-group are also choosing that person?â€• (6) â€œwhom in the group do you choose to support as a way to avoid focus on an issue that causes anxiety in you.â€• (7) â€œwhom do you choose for the focus as a way to withhold focus from someone you donâ€™t like?â€•Â

The group members may need to examine motivation and clarify criteria (system maintenance) before moving into personal work (self-system). The group may need to examine which issues cause anxiety (growth) rather than to choose based on safety (comfort). The group leader(s) may want to intervene during the choice process (use authority) rather than let the choice process unfold without comment (freedom).

Conditions which may indicate a â€œsuspicion of intentâ€• in present

Group members will express difficulty in choosing, or having to choose between two particular people. The issue of fairness over responding to urgency will surface. The more introverted people in the group will stop making a bid for focus. (It is hard enough to make the effort without having to endure a prolonged choice process.) People will begin to speak about not liking competition or conflict. The level of sharing afterwards will more than likely vary widely in terms of subject and depth and not include all group members.

Suggestions for an Intervention

It will be important for everyone to understand some of the dynamics which prompts a person to seek group focus or the protagonist position.Â As a facilitator I might support the group working on individual needs in the here and now and have the group devote the very next session to exploring the dynamics of choosing. It may be approached as a straightforward look at ways to negotiate in the world of group needs and be supportive to each person's desire for comfort and growth.

A sentence completion exercise can be homework between sessions. For example:

1. When people put themselves out to work on an issues they need a response which is
_____ and _____.

2. I like having a choice even though it causes me to feel _____.

3. What I need when I have difficulty choosing is _____.

4. I know I begin to feel anxious when someone mentions working on a issue(s) about
_____

5. The persons who should decide when the group is stuck are _____.

Use of the Diamond of Opposites 2

The beauty of the use of the Diamond of Opposites (Carlsen-Sabelli and Sabelli) is it assists in exploring ambivalent response via a â€œboth/andâ€• response rather than and â€œeither/orâ€• response. This helps the questions remain active and not concluded before consensus can be reached. Each group member learns the process of indicating the pull to choose and the pull not to choose based on the agreed question. For

example, My pull to choose based on urgency of need and my pull not to choose based on urgency of need. The two pulls intersect on the diamond in one of five basic areas: positive dominance, negative dominance, primarily neutral, primarily conflictual or equally ambivalent. A statement may be made (soliloquy) which is a reflection which fits that particular position on the Diamond. This facilitates group members speaking aloud an internal process. Once group members are comfortable with the process and begin to rely on its ease of use to clarify, the diamond may be used to plot â€œmy pull to choose this specific personâ€• and â€œmy pull not to choose this specific personâ€•. As the soliloquies are made the selection process becomes revealed as statements from individual group members and not about the potential protagonists. This helps the communication stay in the authentic range.

Opinion map 3

If you begin to hear a number of â€œshouldsâ€• â€œthe protagonists should be people who are ___â€• or the â€œfocus needs to be on people who are __â€• these norm-formation statements can be plotted as opinions in the action space, mapped as â€œcitiesâ€• to visit. Once the various opinions are placed, each group member moves to an opinion and begins to speak aloud â€œas ifâ€• he or she holds that opinion. Everyone moves around to the various places, speaking to whomever is also in that particular place, acting in the role of that opinion holder. This helps people role reverse with the various opinions which exist in the group. The next step is to move to a place on the map which reflects your best guess of where your own opinion here and now resides. Each person makes a statement.

The issue of motivation

For some, not all, having the focus of the group to help you explore an issue fills a need to be important, to be cherished, to be the star. In some families a person is led to believe this is their rightful place in a group. In other families the position was permanently withheld. Seeking the position has a story which can reveal more of these dynamics and foster both individual and group development. Even though I as the facilitator may be exercising a judgement when I suspect the intent of a potential protagonist I resist being judgmental and choose instead to follow my curiosity.

I also see as part of my role tending to those persons whose issues have been deferred to a later time.

_____

1. Bradford, Leland P., Jack R. Gibbs and Kenneth D. Benne (1964), T-Group Therapy and Laboratory Method. NY, John Wiley and Sons, 220-221.

2. Carlson-Sabelli, Linnea, Hector Sabelli and Ann E. Hale, â€œSociometry and sociodynamicsâ€• IN Psychodrama Since Moreno (1994) London, Routledge, p. 150-154.

3. The opinion map is attributed to Colin Martin, Waiheke Island, New Zealand.

This page comes from International Sociometry Training Network:
http://sociometry.net

The URL for this page is:
http://sociometry.net/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=21