Systems-Centered Therapy (SCT®) and its Interpersonal Neurobiology: Lowering Scapegoating and Developing Our Social Brains

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Orientation to Systems-Centered\textsuperscript{®} Theory and Training

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Systems-Centered Theory
Living human systems survive, develop, and transform from simple to complex through a developing ability to recognize differences and integrate them.

Systems-centered theory explains how living human systems contain their energy within functional boundaries and direct it towards their goals: the primary goals of survival and development and the secondary goals of environment mastery.

Systems-centered theory can be applied clinically to individual, group, couples and family therapy. It can also be applied to all levels of the system in organizations.

Systems-Centered Training
Systems-centered training teaches how to understand and influence living human systems and how to take up one’s role as an agent of change, both for the self and for other living human systems.

Members in systems-centered training learn how to bring their energy into the here-and-now and focus it on the goals. This is accomplished by crossing the boundaries from the outside into the inside, from the past and the future into the present, from fantasy into reality, and into the role of membership.

Innovations in Systems-Centered Theory and Training
SCT\textsuperscript{®} members learn through experience. By exploring rather than explaining, members learn to tell the difference between comprehensive understanding (words first, experience second) and apprehensive understanding (experience first, words second).

Learning this skill leads to “containing” the energy that frustrations and conflicts arouse rather than discharging, binding, or constricting it in defenses of symptoms. Energy in SCT groups is understood as the ability to work towards the goals between, within, and among all the different living human systems in the hierarchy of systems.

In SCT training groups, all members work in functional subgroups rather than work alone. Subgroups contain both sides of every issue in the group-as-a-whole which frees the individual to choose which side of the conflict has therapeutic salience for their work.
## FUNCTIONAL AND STEREOTYPE SUBGROUPING

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FUNCTIONAL AND STEREOTYPE SUBGROUPS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPS</th>
<th>STEREOTYPE SUBGROUPS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>all subgroups</td>
<td>all subgroups</td>
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<tr>
<td>join around similarities and split around differences</td>
<td>join around similarities and split around differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>functional subgroups contain and explore differences instead of stereotyping and scapegoating them</td>
<td>stereotype subgroups come together around obvious similarities like black and white, male and female, them and us</td>
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<tr>
<td>each subgroup discovers new differences by exploring the similarities within them</td>
<td>everybody knows how to make stereotype subgroups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>so each subgroup discovers new similarities by exploring the differences between them</td>
<td>everybody knows what to do and what to say to make top dogs, under dogs and little dogs</td>
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<td>when the differences within each subgroup join with the similarities between each subgroup the group-as-a-whole transforms into a new group able to work differently from the old group Re-integrating around similarities. after deliberately splitting around differences moves the group-as-a-whole along the path to its goal</td>
<td>everybody knows how to keep the ins in and the outs out everybody knows how to make scapegoats of each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>functional subgrouping upsets the social order by making a place for everyone and letting everyone find their place to make the social system work</td>
<td>Stereotype subgroups discriminate differences and won't integrate them</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>stereotype subgroups manage the hatred and fear that is aroused by differences by creating a social pecking order by having a place for everyone and keeping everyone in their place to make the social system stable</td>
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LEARNING DESCRIPTIVE REFLECTION
Step one in Functional Subgrouping

THREE 15 MINUTE EXERCISES

Divide into groups of three, and assign yourselves as an A and a B and a C.
Each of you will take a turn.
Find a group pen! A takes the pen and talks to B. C takes the role of observer.

10 minutes (or less – not more!)

START: A holds the pen and says something to B.
B’s job is to earn the pen by reflecting what A said.
IF...A feels B missed the message or part of it, A asks B to reflect it again.
B tries again. If B has difficulty, B asks A to say it again.
A and B continue to negotiate until A feels understood.
(If A & B get stuck, a useful question for B to ask is “what is the heart of your message?”)
WHEN...A feels that B got the message, then A gives B the pen.

5 Minutes (or less – not more!)

Surprises, Learnings, Satisfactions, Dissatisfactions, Discoveries

Observer C starts with surprises, learnings, satisfactions, dissatisfactions, and discoveries and is then joined in the exercise by A & B.

NEXT: repeat 15 minute exercise with B holding the pen and talking to C, with A as observer.

NEXT: repeat 15 minute exercise with C holding the pen and talking to A, with B as observer.

Agazarian 2010© Please use these exercises only for yourself. You are not yet qualified to practice on anyone else.
Roles in Our Person-as-a-System

- Life force energy
- Survivor
- Exploratory drive
- Observer

- Exploratory energy development

- Organizing energy transformation

Inner Person
- Present adaptive roles
- Past adaptive roles

Inter-Person
- Curious
- Explorer, researcher, member, subgroup

Whole System
- Norm-setter
- Liaison
DEVELOPING THE GROUP MIND THROUGH FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPING:
LINKING SYSTEMS-CENTERED® TRAINING (SCT) AND INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY

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This article introduces the systems-centered concept of the “group mind” by linking systems-centered thinking and interpersonal neurobiology, building on Siegel’s definition of mind as the process of regulating the flow of energy and information. Functional subgrouping, the systems-centered group method for resolving conflicts, discriminates and integrates the flow of energy and information within and between group members, subgroups, and the group-as-a-whole, thus potentiating survival, development, and transformation. This article uses the interpersonal neurobiological framework to discuss functional subgrouping as a tool for developing the group mind: considering how functional subgrouping facilitates emotional regulation, creates a secure relational context, and potentiates neural integration.

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Neurobiology and Building Interpersonal Systems:
Groups, Couples and Beyond

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS:

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Paul Cox, MD

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