

## Robinsons on Parallel What Makes a Group?

Dr. Karen John, teacher of Group Dynamics at the International Alfred Adler Psychology Summer School in Switzerland this summer, provided us with useful information personally and professionally. Drawing from her handout, “What Is a Group?” The following ideas give us all food for thought.

We are all in some kind of group nearly every day, starting with our own family group, then moving to a work group, a volunteer group, a church group, a business group, networking group, Y/Exercise group and on and on. Groups are made up of persons.

Each person has an identity, which we as Adlerian Psychologists know, comes from our family experiences, our cultural background, our learned attitudes and values, our education, our needs, our emotions, our emotions, needs, biases, age, appearance, and affect.

In a group setting each person relates to the others. It is nearly impossible to stay in complete isolation. The connectedness happens in pairs or threes or more. People meet together and react to one another, react to the reactions, and so on. The reactions are observable and often as volatile as a ping pong ball bouncing across the net. They tell us the conscious and unconscious influences that are who **we** are and who the **other person is**. Strong bonds may be formed from the very beginning as well as obvious mismatches of personalities.

Amazingly enough a group takes on an identity of its own. Often what happens in a group is greater than any of the individuals in the group. Very interesting dynamics occur. Sometimes the group connects; sometimes it clashes. Individuals may react very strongly to the group as well as to the individuals in the group. It is

not uncommon, according to Dr. John for individuals to feel fear of rejection or abandonment, fears of being swallowed up or of losing one's identity.

Are you thinking back to the groups in which you have participated or just attended or felt rejected? It is so common for folks to be with a group but not IN the group. Much of the responsibility for how a group is conducted is with the leader and the leader's style. Group members, however, chose to cooperate, clash, connect, care based on their commitment to the group and its goals (stated or unstated.) Just as in a family, each individual has the ultimate power to say NO.

Dr. John shared the Concerns that People Usually Bring to a New Group as these:

Who is the leader? Who may take the leadership role in the group

What is the purpose or task of this group? Leader generated, assigned, group determined?

What are the rules of the group? Do the members agree with the rules? Will rules be enforced? Are there unspoken rules?

Will I fit in? Do I want to belong? How much influence can I have? How much do I want? Will I be accepted? Will I be rejected?

What is the group atmosphere? How safe is it in the group? How do people connect with each other? Is the feeling open and friendly? Can there be safe disagreements here?

Where are the similarities and differences? Is anyone here similar to me? Is anyone potentially "dangerous" to me? Will I get any recognition for who I am?

What about sub-groups or pairing? Is there someone I know already? Is there anyone with whom I can join? Are there other subgroups and pairings in this group already?

Establishing a comfortable, welcoming atmosphere in a group determines whether or not it will be productive. There is much to be learned about groups and what happens in them. The participants in Dr. John's class all left with valuable skills and insights, thanks to her leadership.