

Selfish and Unselfish Behavior: Scene Stealing and Scene Sharing In Group Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author discusses scene sharing and scene stealing in group psychotherapy and considers the role of values in judging behavior as selfish or unselfish. Working intersubjectively within the dynamic system of group psychotherapy, the author focuses on the affective reactions of therapists and patients. By considering values an important aspect of group therapy, the therapist is alert to the possible impingement of one's own or the group's values on the process.

In this paper, I examine scene stealing and scene sharing from an intersubjective perspective, highlighting the affective experiences of selfish and unselfish behavior. I also consider therapists' and patients' values and their impact on how they view or interpret behavior. My thesis is that in a group there is a delicate balance between the primacy of individual need and that of the whole group.

Selfish and unselfish are subjective and value-laden words. Though we may not use this judgmental language when speaking with patients, there is no doubt that there are times in a group when a member will be experienced as scene stealing (being selfish) or scene sharing (being altruistic). Defined simply, selfish be-

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havior is what we observe when an individual group member insistently attempts to dominate group action for the fulfillment of his/her own needs, disregarding the others. I define unselfish behavior or scene sharing as involving the recognition of the needs of the whole group without abandoning individual need. Although this language is value-laden, I use it purposefully to highlight strong affective experiences of members and therapists as they attempt to negotiate group life.

The move from a focus on the individual to the group entity requires a capacity for cooperative behavior. In a cohesive group, the norm of the group to behave cooperatively does not diminish the importance of individual members; however, unless or until a group develops its own standards of behavior, there remains the possibility of destructive antigroup (Nitsun, 1996) behavior, which derails the therapeutic process. This balance, between the needs of the individual and those of the whole group, is uniquely confronted by each group and cannot be predetermined. It is in the process of the group that we experience behaviors that consciously or unconsciously we define as selfish, demanding, narcissistic, and disregarding of the other or as unselfish, caring, loving, and altruistic. My focus on the intersubjective is an effort to address how groups come to define particular behaviors as they arise out of the complexity of group life. I suggest that the affective experience and expression of the intersubjective are the primary access to the group process. In addition, my emphasis on values adds another dimension to the affective experience. When a member is unable to negotiate this shift and behaves as if the group is an arena to use as an individual session, it can have a significant impact on group functioning, interfering with the development of a strong affiliative motivation.

Writing on motivation and the attachment system, Lichtenberg (1989) sees the capacity to be affiliative occurring developmentally later as an outgrowth of early attachment experiences within the family. This system expands beyond the family to include affiliation as the child joins school and peer groups. Early self injuries in the child's life can impair attachment capacities, affecting not only

dyadic relationships but also effective functioning in groups of any kind. This difficulty is most apparent in a therapy group where patients may be unable to see their impact on others despite their desire to be affiliative. This conceptual understanding helps the leader work through value-laden negative countertransference feelings, enabling him or her to see the "selfish" patient as needing to develop a capacity to share.

The incorporation of values is a significant aspect of an individual's and group's development. Unless they are openly acknowledged, they can have subtle, potentially destructive impacts on how a group functions. That is, in a group attempting to form cohesive bonds, the presence of someone who seems unable or unwilling to embrace the developing group culture can cause a disruption, which feels injurious. Further, each group is in a constant state of change in which members learn to negotiate this balance among themselves and for the group. I will attempt to explore this from an intersubjective perspective, viewing group values as an aspect of the intersubjective system.

AFFECT AS CONTEXTUAL

In a recent article, Stolorow (2002) posits "that the shift in psychoanalytic thinking from the primacy of drive to the primacy of affectivity moves psychoanalysis toward a phenomenological contextualism (Orange, Atwood, & Stolorow, 1997) in a central focus on dynamic intersubjective systems. Unlike drives, affect—that is, subjective emotional experience—is something that from birth onward is regulated or misregulated, within ongoing relational systems" (p. 678). Nowhere is this more apparent than in a therapy group. Often members enter group with deficits in their ability to express or understand affect. Group is useful as a treatment mode for those who are afraid of feelings, blocked in experiencing them, or impaired in their capacity to understand or express affect. It is a setting in which people can learn to accept their feelings, experience decreased fear around affect, and come to feel and express some of life's most profound emotions, ranging from rage to joy

to transcendence, in the presence of others. It is also a setting in which those who need help in self-regulation and affect modulation can be guided by the group.

Strong feelings, either positive or negative, can generate guilt, shame, and anxiety. All of these responses are impacted by an individual's values, which heighten the desire to hide as in shame, rage or retreat as in anger, or suffer humiliation as in guilt. The individual's value system, shaped in the safety or terror of early history, quickly comes into play in a group setting. Perhaps for the first time, a group member may experience the pleasure of receiving the attention and interest of others; or someone may feel the pain of being overlooked, not the center of attention, finding that what must be learned and negotiated is this very experience.

How group members express affects reflects the intersubjective field of therapist and members with the attitudes and values of all shaping the dynamic system. As Socarides and Stolorow (1984/85) hypothesize, it is the capacity to integrate affect into self-experience and to have one respond in a way that recognizes and appreciates affect that is central to personal growth. This basic requirement is often not met in childhood. Group psychoanalysis and psychotherapy provide the opportunity to be seen and understood as never before. Group therapy, however, can also merely re-create early negative affiliative experiences if the member is unable to commit to the formation of the group's therapeutic values, a situation that often becomes manifested when the member disrupts the unconsciously held value system of the group. Therefore, recognizing values-in-action becomes an important aspect of the intersubjective field and requires the therapist to be alert to his or her own values and own affective responses as significant determinants of group action.

As Stolorow (2002) points out, referencing Heidegger, "affectivity is a mode of living, of being-in-the-world, profoundly embedded in a constitutive context. Heidegger's concept underscores the exquisite context-dependence and context-sensitivity of human emotional life" (p. 679). How the group context provides the opportunity for new emotional experiences has to do

both our own affective reactions and those of the members. Where is the "truth" in the process, whose "reality" is accurate, and how do we respect the variety of affective responses which unfold in the group? In many years of working with groups, I have found that I start with my own reactions to either individual members or the entire group. This becomes my point of inquiry, first of myself and my cotherapist, then of the group. My assumption is that my personal history in every sense of the word shapes my responses, the history of the group, and the reactions of individual members. Often it is not until a particular process has been unfolding for an extended period that I begin to "get" that I need to focus more deeply. This sharpened focus can start with what feels like my own personal reactivity to a particular behavior, such as monopolizing of time, or may arise from my observations of group members' reactivity or nonparticipation.

I am especially curious when I seem to be the only one in the group having a strong affective reaction. This phenomenon can be viewed as my "holding" the affect for the group or my serving as the repository for projections; from an intersubjective perspective, the entire group may be having an affective reaction, but I may have more immediate access to the experience because of its particular personal meaning for me.

DEVELOPING GROUP VALUES

As analysts and therapists, we have been trained to value a "nonjudgmental" stance toward the patient's productions. In consequence, values and morality may be sidestepped, relegated to the periphery of treatment, or focused on only when they are viewed as troublesome manifestations of a strict superego. Lichtenberg, Lachmann, and Fosshage (1992), however, state that "we recognize a place for analysts' and analysands' values and morality in the analysis of all motives and in the construction of model scenes" (p. 169).

Selfish and *unselfish* are emotional terms which closely capture phenomenological experience. For example, describing behav-

ior as narcissistic rather than selfish is relatively experience distant. More precisely, narcissistic behavior suggests the failure to recognize the other as having selfobject needs; the other is viewed as providing something for the self without being recognized as a subject with selfobject needs of his or her own (Kohut, 1984). To function effectively in a group requires a certain capacity to recognize the other as also having selfobject needs.

While consideration of selfobject need is often the basis for referral to group therapy, it does not describe the actual affective experience of either the therapist or group members. I am not suggesting that we should use value-laden language as part of our interpretations or observations, but that we acknowledge affective reactions which may help to focus more actively on the issue at hand. These reactions can also reveal to us our own values and how these are part of the creation of the experience. Specifically, by using the term *selfish*, I am exposing my own value system or moral stance in which cooperation and sharing as well as empathic awareness of the needs of the other figure prominently. Said more simply, I dislike behaviors that seem to serve only the individual and disregard the other and I admire behaviors that suggest the person is capable of some sensitivity to the needs of the other. Altruistic behavior is an essential component of healthy group functioning.

This moral stance will have an impact on the group. Most importantly, I am curious when my reactions to scene stealing in one group are significantly different from my reaction to it in another group. It suggests that my experiences are being shaped not only by own values, but also by the value system which has evolved in that particular group. In a group in which all of the members usually contribute effectively to the dialogue of the group, a member who becomes dominating is experienced by me as disruptive to the work. In another group, where members usually focus productively on one member for an entire session or more, deftly attending to that person while referencing their own issues related to the topic explored, I do not feel disturbed.

SCENE SHARING

Lichtenberg et al. (1992) describe the development of altruistic behavior as it is formed in the child-caregiver bond. They state, "beginning at around 18 months of age, toddlers become alert to the distress of others and often attempt some remedial action. This observation suggests that altruistic concern about the distress of others is an innate emergent potential that adds an underlying capacity for empathy to attachment experiences" (p. 173). Lichtenberg et al. see the development of values and morals emerging out of parent-child and peer-peer reciprocity (p. 176). We can see this capacity at its best and worst in group therapy. The capacity for altruistic or scene sharing behavior is a necessary component of group functioning. Its absence can destroy a therapy group even if selfish behavior appears to be embedded in only one group member. And if patients are being compliant, agreeable, and overly understanding, it is important to consider whether we are observing what Brandschaft (1993) calls pathological accommodation. That is, it is necessary for the therapist to distinguish altruistic behavior from a pathological accommodation, which is symptomatic of sacrificing the self to the other, diminishing self development. The group operates as a dynamic system, contextual and nonlinear, being impacted at every moment by all the other systems in which each member is immersed. My reference to my own attitude toward selfishness is reflective of other systems in which I am or have been immersed. Understanding the contextual experience of group life also involves trying to grasp the significance of all the contexts in which each member is embedded. These dynamic systems demonstrate the properties present in all systems and are particularly complicated when discussing group behavior.

An Example of Scene Stealing

Jeff was a new member in a group which had been meeting for 4 years. Initially, he was rather quiet, watching the members interact with each other, but over time, he engaged more actively. This was

not his first experience with group treatment but he found this group very different from his previous one and voiced doubts about how "attached" the members were to one another. He was wary of what he considered their carefulness and was worried that the group was not going "deep enough." Others listened to his concerns, taking them seriously and even seemed at times to be willing to placate him by providing evidence of when they had gone "deeper."

Gradually, as he felt more included, Jeff began to dominate some sessions. Again, members remained interested because his issues seemed, as another member stated, "so special." The patience of the group with Jeff's evaluative comments and criticism as well as his domination of entire sessions was becoming annoying to me. I began to feel that he was disregarding the needs of others in the group and that his keen sensitivity to his own sense of injury, which group members recognized, served to silence them. I understood my own annoyance as based on efforts I had made to connect with Jeff, which he ignored. Further, I was feeling that the others were sacrificing their ability to deal directly with each other, hard won in the group, to protect Jeff from further injury. I found myself experiencing Jeff as selfish and unable or unwilling to consider that others needed time and attention. Viewing a group member as selfish had me curious about my reaction and wondering if others shared my experience of his selfishness. After the session, I checked with my cotherapist. Jeff's behavior bothered him somewhat less.

Then Jeff, for no explicable reason, would recede into the background. He would appear to be listening but offered few comments. There was little sense of his capacity to engage empathically unless the material mirrored an experience of his own. When this happened, the attention shifted to him yet again. I was struck by the group's capacity to tolerate Jeff's indifference to their needs, viewing it as a reflection of their limits in being direct or confrontational. I also had to stop and observe my own affective experience. I seemed to want them to be confrontational and take him to task for his alternating pattern of indifference and domina-

tion. My strong reactions and the group's patience made me reconsider my ideas and reactions about Jeff's selfishness. What I viewed as his selfish behavior the group held and contained in a most unselfish manner. I had to consider whether what I was observing was growth producing or a manifestation of pathological accommodation at the group level.

Over time, I developed the view that the members were in fact giving space to Jeff in a most unselfish way to protect the integrity of the group. I believe that they had recognized that the group could gradually integrate Jeff into the process in a manner helpful to everyone. This was demonstrated time and again when members gave Jeff the opportunity to discuss his issues and then gently added their own issues to the discussion. Their unselfish behavior in fact did yield just these very results. Gradually members would interrupt Jeff to inform him that they also needed time and gradually Jeff became more interested and connected to the other members and their stories. I was able to observe this shift in Jeff and worked with him on his deep desire that others truly listen to and understand him.

A significant interaction between Jeff and me occurred when I suggested that perhaps there was an explanation for his inability to share the time with other members. He could not imagine that they were willing to share the time with him. His initial reaction was to feel shamed but he soon allowed that there was some relief in my raising the issue with him because he was in fact feeling ashamed for "hogging the time" and was often unable to sleep after such a session. My interpretations aided members in understanding Jeff's need for mirroring and helped me to clarify my own feeling about his selfishness by staying close to my affective experiences and using them not to punish or scold but to moderate my own reactivity. By being curious about the basis of my value-laden feeling, I found my own inquiry to be more honest. I could raise with Jeff my experience of his dominating the group in a way that allowed him to recognize his behavior and explore it without feeling shamed. I wondered with him what his alternating patterns of domination and indifference meant.

Because of his experience in an earlier group in which confrontation was a common mode of operation, Jeff was able to consider his behavior in a relatively non-anxious manner, retaining his capacity for curiosity. My relief at expressing my own reactions to his behavior freed me to engage in a more honest exchange with him. However, it was not until I had explored my own strong affective reactions from the perspective of my values that I was able to be more honest with the patient. I found that my own shame over labeling his behavior as selfish had silenced me. I had to experience this deadened aspect of me before I could respond to Jeff. It was when I was able to see that I had become silent that I began to explore my hesitation in dealing with Jeff.

My cotherapist's ability to be more relaxed about Jeff's behavior was also a significant issue. He was able to serve as a moderating influence through his ability to contain both my reactivity and Jeff's expansiveness. It was not until I was able to define my own moralistic feelings and accept them that I was able to work with Jeff on the meaning of his behavior. That is, until I could admit to myself that I was not operating from a position of analytic inquiry but was silenced by my own discomfort at feeling so judgmental that I could not interact with Jeff. This process continues to unfold within the group and has generated for me many interesting issues regarding the power of the group, the many manifestations of this power, and how individual and selfish behavior can shift to affiliative behavior in which the capacity to cooperate provides new experiences for everyone.

Recently, Jeff came to a session expressing considerable anxiety about a work situation. He told his story without any interruption from the group. As he became more and more anxious and verbose, members and cotherapists attempted to intervene, trying to help him understand the source of his intense affective reaction. All efforts to clarify or to offer alternative perspectives could not move Jeff to an exploratory mode. He remained entrenched in his position, unable to consider what was offered and equally unable to relinquish his domination of the session. Once again, I felt frustrated with Jeff and with the group for their flight from a more confronta-

tional position. Because of my anger, I chose to remain silent, also realizing that I too had taken flight. As I attempted to reverse my position, I made an effort to join Jeff in an exploratory mode. I directed my intervention to what appeared to be his expectation that he should receive emotional understanding in the workplace and that he and his manager should both reveal their "true feelings."

Raising this issue with him gave me some sense of my being back in the room. Other group members became more active and my cotherapist, taking a somewhat different position, began to explore early history, suggesting to Jeff that his desire for emotional resonance was part of his traumatic early history of losing a beloved father and being left with a hostile, depressed mother. The session ended on a calmer note, but there was little sense that Jeff had absorbed the work of the group. Even more importantly, there was no reference to the fact that Jeff had "selfishly" taken a full session seemingly without any awareness of his overriding any other issue in the room.

Soon after that session, I had an individual therapy appointment with Margie, another group member. She came into her appointment enraged at Jeff and his "loud carrying on." She calmed down and began to explore her experience of feeling taken over, dominated, and rendered impotent by Jeff's behavior. This exploration yielded important information which Margie was able to use in understanding parallels in her own history. We had a productive session which included a reminder from me that it was important to bring this material back to the group. She readily agreed, acknowledging that when strong reactions to group occurred outside the session, they needed to bring those reactions back to the group.

The following week Margie started the session by telling Jeff that she wanted to share her reactions to the previous group. She said it was important that she talk about it, because she had done things similar to what he had done. She continued, telling Jeff how angry at him she had been and was too afraid to speak about it in the session because she was sure it would make him feel even worse. The group and Jeff were able to explore the affective experience of the previous session. As the work unfolded, it became clear that de-

spite his seeming inability to take in observations offered by the group, he had in fact done just that. He was able to reiterate various comments made in the previous session, validating members for their contributions.

With the help of my cotherapist, Jeff was able to explore his emotional reactions both in the work setting and in the group. He began to uncover material regarding his mother who responded only to strong affective reactions. The exploration expanded to the whole group, focusing on the unwillingness of the members to challenge or be confrontative when someone seemed in pain. I suggested to myself, that I too was unwilling to enter the fray because my own values silenced me. Paradoxically, because I value an altruistic position, I silenced my own feelings about Jeff's "selfishness," feeling that this reaction would not serve the group process. To preserve the group and protect Jeff from injury seemed to require that I "ride out the storm." Of course, this is reflective of the intersubjective system in which we are all embedded. My feeling silenced in order to preserve the group in fact became part of my experience of the ineffectiveness of the group.

Our own values often play a hidden role in our individual and group treatments, which can have an insidious impact on the work, fostering behaviors that are counterproductive for the treatment. The creation of an open system allows growth to occur. This returns me to the Stolorow (2002) quotes: "the primacy of affectivity moves psychoanalysis toward a phenomenological contextualism" and this "affectivity - is a mode of living, of being-in-the-world, profoundly embedded in a constitutive context." We should consider values a significant contributor to that affective field.

CONCLUSION

Considering values as an aspect of an intersubjective system alerts us to their potential impact on the emergence of group behavior. In remaining alert to the potential impact of strong affective responses, we must bear in mind that affective responses are reflective of the values of the group members and therapists. They are

embedded in the specific intersubjective group culture. By relegating values “to the periphery of treatment” (Lichtenberg et al., 1992), we deprive ourselves of important sources of information about group life. The dynamic system of each group differs. Understanding that particular affective responses will or will not be welcome depending on the specific group culture helps us to be alert to important shifts in the values of group members and therapists. This capacity to reflect on the fluidity of affective response is aided by attending to one’s own values as a point of entry into the unfolding group process.

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Received: January 5, 2005
Final draft: May 7, 2005
Accepted: June 8, 2005