International Journal of Small Group Research
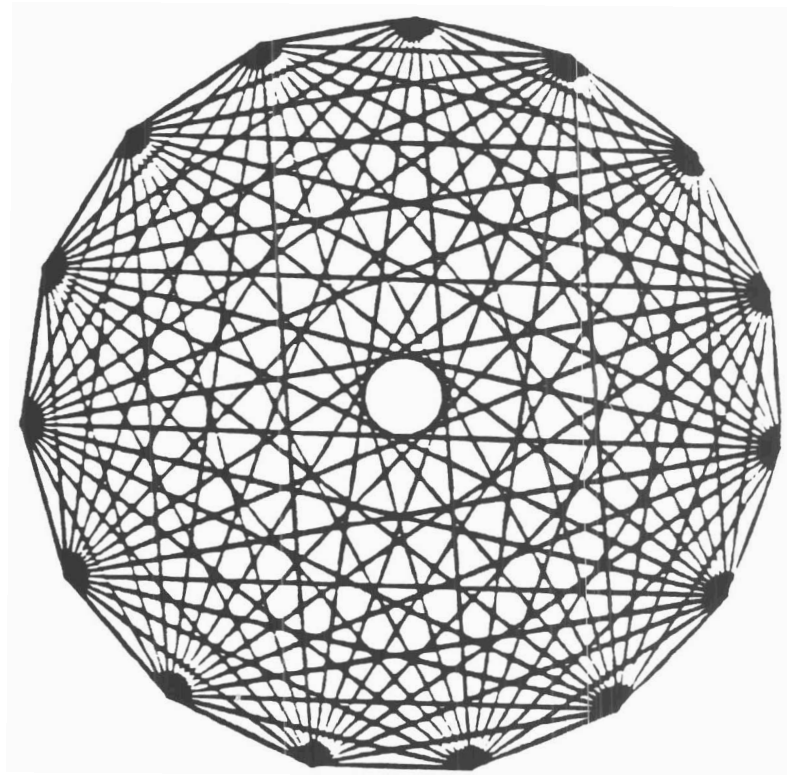
Volume 2   March 1986   Number 1

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DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE IN BLACK WOMEN'S SMALL GROUPS:

AN ABSENCE OF PAIRING [1]

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Abstract

Pairing as defined by Slater (1966) represents an advanced stage of group development in which group participants become aware of themselves as a group and seek to create a new leader or new idea as a strategy for handling the anxieties of individuation. During a five-week series of group meetings of 102 black women, staff members observed the absence of pairing group characteristics. The paper cites some questions implied by this lack of pairing, the most important being whether unique gender, ethnicity, and cultural status of black women affects the evolution of their work groups.

Although much attention has been focused on small group processes, the question of sequential developmental stages in small groups has been neglected. The literature has been sparse due to the tendency of small groups to be conducted over short periods of time and in settings (i.e., group therapy and human relations training) where the leaders are not concerned with strict experimental control or manipulation of independent variables (Tuckman, 1965). Nevertheless, after reviewing the literature, Tuckman (1965) concludes that the sequence of development in small groups tends to remain constant under widely varied conditions of group composition, duration, and tasks.

Even more neglected than the study of group development stages has been research into the processes that occur in groups of blacks, although we do have some indication that gender and ethnicity influence group dynamics (May, 1985b). To question how ethnicity and gender may influence group development, this paper reports some observations on the developmental stages of groups comprised of all back female members and leaders.

The theoretical approach of this paper is based on the principles developed by A.K. Rice at the Center for Applied Social Research of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London (Rice, 1963; Miller & Rice, 1967). This perspective, grounded in the theories of

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Wilfred Bion (1959), views behavior in groups to be a function of a group phenomenon rather than instances of individual behavior. One of Bion's notions was that once a group is formed it operates either in the mode of a "work group" or "basic assumption group." A work group is one in which group members (a) define their purpose, (b) utilize a structure which will lead to the accomplishment of its purpose, (c) grant the group leader authority to direct the group only as long as this authority services in meeting the goals, and (d) do not view the leader as the sole possessor of skills necessary to accomplish the goals.

Few groups however, function consistently in accord with their real work. Instead, groups tend to function regressively in what Bion calls basic assumption modes. Group participants behave as if they are to be led and taken care of and as if the purpose of the group is to preserve itself rather than accomplish a task. Bion observed three emotional states of groups, states determined by the basic assumption on which the group was operating at any given time: dependency, flight/fight, and pairing.

Slater (1966) modified Bion's theory by placing each of the basic assumption states along a continuum of strategies for coping with psychological conflicts experienced in a group. Slater suggested that flight/fight is the most regressive and primitive, and dependency the most ambivalent; pairing is indicative of an advanced stage of growing awareness of the group as an entity independent of the leader.

The Pairing Stage of Group Development. Pairing, in Slater's view, is an outgrowth of the dependency stage (Slater, 1966). In the pairing stage, the group becomes more conscious of itself as separate from the group leader. The group acts as if it has come together for sexual purposes to produce a new leader or new idea, which will fulfill the pairing procreative function and eliminate its anxieties (Bion, 1959). This is in contrast to the previous stages in which the group in a dependent mode invests itself totally in the leader and, in the fight/flight mode where the group turns to someone to lead the fight or flight activities. Bion's pairing stage, though similar to the group cohesion developed in therapy groups, differs in that the cohesion in Bion's group is contained in a pair rather than the whole group (Tuckman, 1965). Nonetheless, like the therapy group, the pairing stage is characterized by common group goals, a group spirit, and mutual support among the members.

In the stages of flight/fight and dependency, the group uses leaders to save it from anxieties, hostilities, and acting out. In contrast, in the pairing stage the group attempts to create its own source of salvation through developing a sense of itself as a group. This stage is characterized by cohesion, unity, and support. A sense of group consciousness unifies into the selection of two members to create the "messiah." Not out of character in this stage is the simulation of the family constellation within the group (Tuckman, 1965). The pairing group tries to confront its pending separateness and individuation by having a "disembodied fantasy of mystical unity and immortality in the form of a distant future Messiah", (Slater, 1966, p. 181). The pairing stage exudes an air of hopefulness and future orientation in which its participants hope to reproduce. This hopefulness and excitement of procreation intimate the sexuality of the group.

Method

This paper grew out of observations made during a project designed to test the value of a Focused Support Group (FSG) model in alleviating employment related stresses and increasing the support networks of a sample of black women. A complete description of the methods devised for the purposes of that project is available in another paper (Mays, 1985a). Only the methods pertinent to the observations about the pairing stage are described here.

Subjects

Participants for the project were recruited by the distribution of flyers in neighborhoods of Los Angeles with large populations of blacks. The flyers announced a five-week series of support group meetings for black women interested in exploring issues affecting them at work. The flyers said that all sessions would be facilitated by black women and were free of charge.

A total of 102 black women participated, with 60% completing the project. They ranged in age from 20 to 50 years, with 21% in the 31-35 age group, 24% in the 36-40 age group, and the remaining 50% were dispersed in lower percentages throughout the remaining age groups. Twenty percent of the participants had masters degrees and 30% had bachelors degrees.

Procedure

Five small groups of 10 to 12 members each were formed according to occupations in white collar categories: professional, clerical, managerial, community workers/social service paraprofessionals, and students. Each group was led by a black female staff member. The volunteer staff ranged in group facilitation experience from one previous group to several years in leading groups.

All members of the groups and staff met five consecutive Saturday mornings at a community mental health center. The first half hour was a large group format in which the topic for the day was defined and behaviors indicating the presence of problems within that topic and black women's strategies for coping were presented. Thus all members of the small groups were oriented to the problem in the same way. Next, the five small groups met for two hours during which they were facilitated in a three-step procedure: (1) The behaviors associated with the topic were identified. For example, for the topic of racism, participants cited instances of not being promoted in spite of being next in line. (2) Moods and feelings associated with the problem were labeled. (3) Behaviors used to cope with the feelings and moods identified. The small group members recorded the results of their discussion on newsprint. In the final half hour the large group was reconvened, and a representative of each small group reported discussion results as recorded on the newsprint. Finally, staff summarized the reports, pointing out similarities and differences in experiences and in methods of handling the problem topic among the five groups.

Staff met a half hour before the start of each weekly session for orientation to the scheduled topic. They met again after the session to discuss the events they had observed in the small and large group

meetings. In the debriefing they reviewed their notes and studied the newsprint reports written by the small groups, as a way of understanding the groups development.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenon of pairing was not observed in either the small or large groups in this project. One would have expected to see women pairing together during the breaks and returning to the groups with fresh ideas. One would have expected couples of women colluding in the groups, with other members allowing it in the hopes that the couple would produce something between them that would save the group from its anxieties. No staff members could report having seen these behaviors in any of the small or large group sessions.

While the small and large groups exhibited the sense of hope and expectation which usually occurs in the pairing mode, pairing itself was not present. Throughout the duration of the groups participants never selected a pair to represent the creation of the "messiah". Instead of the family constellation of two parents, the groups created a parental structure of the single mother, in this instance the project director, responsible for meeting the needs of all. As observed by all the staff the participants seemed to regard the project director as the savior, who could meet all needs and solve any problem. This is a dynamic not unlike that in many black households headed by single women.

The expression of hope exhibited by the group was not for a new arrival. Instead, it was directed toward the project director. Evidence for the group members' attribution of messianic qualities to the project director emerged in the staff group, as well as from the membership. In the debriefing session with staff at the end of the Week One meetings, the project director expressed her feeling of having delivered a sermon in a Baptist or Pentecostal black church. As she had recounted experiences of ethnic and gender discrimination likely to be experienced by black women in the labor market, the participants had nodded their heads as they do in religious services. Although the staff heard no actual amening and hallelujahing, they too experienced the sense of a religious environment. Participants' evaluations of the first session mentioned their hopes for a project of this type and acknowledged its potential for making a difference in the lives of young black females in the community.

The behaviors displayed by the participants were more characteristic of a dependent mode in which the leader is regarded as omnipotent (Slater, 1966; Bion, 1959). Such behavior contrasts with the labor market experiences, social roles, and cultural expectations of this group of white collar black women. Role demands and cultural expectations in the black community often place black women, in active leadership roles in many spheres of their lives. In the groups under observation, the assumption of dependent, passive stances, a seeming desire to be taken care of by other black women represents a dynamic in contrast to broader societal postures. Hence, the dynamic may be specific to black women's relationships among themselves.

These observations raised many questions about the effects of gender and ethnicity on the developmental sequence of small groups. But was the lack of pairing due to the ethnic/gender similarity of the membership composition alone? Or was it because the facilitators'

leadership abilities were the effect of the ethnic/gender similarity and therefore the facilitators failed to act in a way that would move the group into the pairing stage?

Indeed, both staff and participants reported feeling emotionally unfulfilled by the separation that occurred as a result of their leadership roles both in their occupations and in leading the small groups. They felt lonely, isolated, and disappointed by their inability to maintain fulfilling interpersonal relationships with black women in positions of lower authority. This dynamic was poignantly portrayed by the project director who, in her attempt to be "one of the girls," relinquished some of her authority to other staff members. Throughout the series of the meetings, participants expressed desires for creating, enhancing, and maintaining relationships with other black women. Perhaps these conscious desires retard the emergence of the advanced stage of group development, which moves the group away from fusion toward individuation.

Another approach might examine the nonoccurrence of the pairing phenomenon as a defense against the anxiety of homosexuality among the participants. Pairing represented the recreation of a parental structure for procreation (Bion, 1959; Slater, 1966). When the pairing must occur between same sex members, as in a single gender group, it may arouse homophobic anxiety. When the issue of lesbianism arose in the large group, it was met with silence. Lesbianism has been denounced in the black community as genocidal, anti-national, and, from a religious stance, sinful and unnatural (Madhubuti, 1973). In a context of such cultural mores, pairing may be too problematic for black women.

In the phenomenonon of pairing is a search for a vehicle for the disembodied group deity and a replacement for the lost hero (Hartmann & Gibbard, 1975). The cultural role of the mother in Afro-American culture may be the pairing group's "lost hero" resulting in a greater preservation of the "Great Mother" figure (Neumann, 1955).

The important question raised by observations of black women's small groups is whether their unique gender, ethnicity, and cultural status affects the development of their work groups. The task of systematically studying the effects of black women's ethnicity, gender, and cultural dynamics on the group development sequence is underscored by these initial findings of lack of pairing in their groups.

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