

Sophistry: A Promising Group Technique for the Involuntary Client
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This article describes sophistry, a group technique that examines the involuntary client's way of reasoning. This understanding forms the basis for subsequent group counseling sessions aimed at rehabilitation.

Alfred Adler (1931, 1954, 1970) and Stanton Samenow (Harris, 1984; Samenow, 1984; Yochelson & Samenow, 1976, 1977), who both worked extensively with criminals, observed that crime does not occur simply because of poverty or heredity. Instead, criminals think differently from the rest of the population. Their thinking lacks concern for others, which is evident in their unwillingness to cooperate in the everyday tasks of work, intimacy, and friendship (Adler, 1954). Adler (1970) observed, "With criminals it is different: they have a private logic, a private intelligence. They suffer from a wrong outlook upon the world, a wrong estimate of their own importance and the importance of other people" (p.7).

Adler's term *private logic* refers to the individual's cognitive constructs that are not necessarily in line with reality but are "personal truths" that guide the individual (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987). Private logic can be contrasted with the idea of *common sense*, or the mutually agreed on beliefs and knowledge of the larger community. Private logic includes three psychological processes: (a) the long range goals of the lifestyle, (b) the immediate goals of a given situation, and (c) the hidden reason that justifies their thoughts and deeds (Shulman & Dreikurs, 1978). Given this information, crimes that seem bizarre and crazy to most people, when viewed from the private logic of the criminal, can be understood as deliberate, rational, purposive, and in contact with reality.

This article describes a group techniques designed to work with involuntary group members, such as offenders, that quickly accesses their *hidden reasons*. Hidden reasons are the elements of the individual's private that lead to unsuitable adaptation and a failure to meet the challenges of work, intimacy, and friendship (Shulman & Dreikurs, 1978). Hidden reasons are what offenders use to justify their criminal behavior. Counselors, working with involuntary clients, as well as offenders, may benefit from this group technique (Withrow, 194). Behavior that seemed puzzling or even alien becomes intelligent and understandable when viewed from the offender's private logic (Powers & Griffith, 1987). This understanding can form the basis for subsequent group counseling sessions aimed at rehabilitation (Friedland & Greever, 1974).

THE SOPHISTRY GROUP TECHNIQUE

Group work with offenders has been reported in the professional literature for more than 30 years (Zimpfer, 1992). The primary purpose for offender group counseling is to

prepare them for their return to society while reducing the likelihood that they will repeat their offenses (Benekos, 1991; Romig & Gruenke, 1991; Zimpfer, 1992). Lassner (1950) was first to suggest that group work, and in particular psychodrama, was of considerable value in helping offenders. Later, Corsini supported the belief that psychodrama was uniquely valuable for the rapid dissolution of resistance and the attainment of a therapeutic climate among offenders (Haskell, 1974).

However, a unique problem exists when conducting group counseling with offenders. Offenders enter treatment involuntarily because third party (the courts or the correctional system) refers them to therapy (Demone & Gibelman, 1990; Harris & Watkins, 1987; Ritchie, 1986; Segal & Watzlawick, 1986). Because they do not trust the “system,” criminals view counselors as agents of the state who are not there to ameliorate the offender’s personal problems (Haley, 1990). Therefore, in group counseling, offenders reveal as little personal information as possible. They fear this information will be used against them legally in court or that other inmates may victimize them in the correctional setting (Melnick, 1984). Yet, the group leader is someone who can influence the offender’s release from the correctional system or provide them with special favors (Zimpfer, 1992).

As a result, group counseling often becomes an exciting game. The object of the game is to control the group and to gratify personal needs (Samenow, 1984). The criminals accomplish this by saying what the group leader and the staff want to hear. During group, they ventilate their feelings, discuss the bad breaks in their life, talk about the past, and demonstrate insight into their “mental condition,” but nothing of significance is revealed. How they process the world around them is not changed. Everyone maintains a good impression, but therapeutic group dynamics are not formed. The group becomes expressive and supportive but lacks the curative factors of cohesiveness and identification (see MacDevitt & Sanislow, 1987; Yalom, 1985).

How can counselors get beyond the offenders’ reluctance and desires to make a good impression and develop a therapeutic group? The sophistry technique was developed for dealing with the offenders’ resistance to group counseling and for circumventing the power struggle between the offender and the counselor (correctional system). Given the limitations of the offender population, the ability to get beyond their reluctance is essential to beneficial group treatment outcomes (Napolitano & Brown, 1991).

What is sophistry? Webster’s (1993) dictionary defines *sophistry* as a “false argument” or a “superficially plausible, but generally fallacious method of reasoning.” Relying on the group as a social microcosm (Yalom, 1985), the sophistry technique creates interactions revealing hidden reasons found in the offender’s private logic. When revealed and understood, the offender then learns alternative ways of thinking and behaving. The sophistry technique relies on six essential elements.

Warm-Up

To help generate discussion and evaluate change, the group is given a pre- and post questionnaire based on the 12 hidden reasons (listed later in this article). This is done by listing each hidden reason using a 5-point response scale ranging from (1) *absolutely true* to (5) *absolutely false*. The questionnaire, given at the beginning of the group serves a

group warm-up. The questionnaire directs each group member's attention toward how they think. This helps move the group into the action phase (the debate). The post questionnaire, following the debate, allows the group members to recognize changes in how they view themselves. This helps move the group into the reorientation phase.

Paradoxical Intention

The sophistry technique relies on the use of paradox. Paradox is a clinical tool for dealing with resistance and for circumventing power struggles between the counselor and the group members. Paradoxical interventions work well with longstanding, repetitious patterns of interaction that do not respond direct rational suggestions. A paradoxical intervention is one that, if followed, will achieve the opposite of what it is seemingly intended to accomplish. Its success depends on the group defying the counselor's instructions to the point of absurdity (Papp, 1981).

In this technique, *paradoxical intention* makes operational the offender's reluctance to win over his or her cooperation. The technique begins with the group leader prescribing the symptom. The group leader asks the group members not to change but, instead, to demonstrate how they already think. This way the group leader joins the clients rather than opposes them. The leader, instead of fighting the group members' long-held beliefs, asks them to recognize, accept, and exaggerate their strongly held thoughts, thus creating a paradoxical situation (Sherman & Fredman, 1986). Often, group members get so caught up in presenting their long-held beliefs that they begin laughing at the realization of what they are saying.

Cognitive Click

Next, the sophistry technique is structured around the use of a stimulus known as a *cognitive click*. When clients do not want to change, it is necessary to use stimuli with enough dramatic impact, to "shake them up" (Cohen, 1985). A cognitive click is a dramatic moment at which the client must face the evidence and begin drastic revision of his or her cognition and related attitudes and beliefs.

For instance, the reason for structuring the sophistry technique around a cognitive click was the realization that although criminals behave according to their private logic, they possess a solid recognition of common sense. If you simply provide a list of hidden reasons to a group of offenders, particularly a professionally led group, they quickly acknowledge their errors in relation to common sense, but leave out their real intentions. They even admit to thinking that is irrational, but then insist that everyone thinks this way (Withrow, 1994). Offenders give statements pronouncing their noble intent of wanting to reform and change (common sense), whereas their behavior implies the exact opposite (private sense). Consequently, a cognitive click must be designed to tap into the offender's private sense.

The cognitive click in this technique uses an element shared among criminals. Adler (1931) contended that offenders strive for superiority and therefore lack a willingness to cooperate. This striving for superiority is displayed in their competitiveness. By engaging the participants in competition, in this case a debate (the cognitive click), the offenders use arguments, justifications, excuses, hesitations, and other maneuvers based on their hidden reasons. Thus, the sophism (false arguments) they

put forth to win the debate reveals their hidden reasons and the thinking that led them to prison.

The cognitive click is created by dividing the group into two teams, each of which is given a set of 12 “Hidden Reasons That Lead to Incarceration” (Evans & Kane, 1993; list follows). One team argues “for” the first six statements and “against” the second six statements. The other team is given the same set of statements but is assigned the reverse position. All 12 statements are debated in turn, with each team presenting its assigned side on the statement. The team arguing against the idea begins each round and concludes each round with a rebuttal to the arguments supporting the statement made by the team going second. This is done so that the rounds end by pointing out the flawed logic of each statement.

The group leader assumes the attitude that he or she does not know the right answer. As mentioned previously, the leader facilitates the debate by asking the group members to not change but to demonstrate how they already think (paradox). Each group member then gets to argue for and against important ideas and listens to each other’s arguments (mirror technique). The group leader facilitates the discussion so that everyone’s opinion is treated with mutual respect and dignity. Experience has shown that it is best not to bog down in the procedural issues. By allowing participants to get a little carried away, they become more involved and make use of their private logic.

Offenders who have prior experience in group counseling are caught off guard by the debate (cognitive click). The debate requires them to practice using their private logic while they, and not the counselor, challenge and point out each other’s errors in thinking. This raises the curiosity of those group members who view counseling as a game. Their typical styles of being reluctant do not work well in this intervention, especially when they are required to respond to an ambiguous situation (Romig & Gruenke, 1991).

Mirroring

The sophistry technique uses a form of the *mirror technique* found in psychodrama. *Psychodrama* refers to the method by which problems are solved through enactment rather than by talking (Blatner, 1973). As mentioned, most offenders seek out ways to say what the staff wants to hear. Psychodrama takes away the offenders’ opportunity to just talk and places them into a conflict situation in which their private logic emerges. It seems that psychodrama was made to order for counseling offenders (Corsini, 1957; Haskell, 1974; Lassner, 1950; Manzella & Yablonsky, 1991; Melnick, 1984). The debate (cognitive click) created in this technique allows the group members to mirror each other’s thinking and behaving (Blatner, 1973). Mirroring creates a self-confrontation when the group members see themselves reflected in the other participants’ behavior.

It is recommended that a videotape be made of the debate and used during the reorientation phase. The videotape creates another type of mirror effect. The group participants are able to observe themselves and others act out their hidden reasons. In this process, they learn how to identify specific hidden reasons and the psychological mechanisms behind their thinking. For instance, by observing and applying the concepts to each other, they learn the difference between hidden reasoning and common sense.

Hidden Reasons

The fifth component involves the use of *hidden reasons*. Hidden reasons are the elements of the individual's private logic that lead to unsuitable adaptation and a failure to meet challenges of work, intimacy, and friendship. The concept of hidden reasons developed from the notion of a *basic mistake* and is similar to Ellis's (1989, 1994) notion of *irrational beliefs*. Basic mistakes are exaggerated, useless, destructive, and self-discouraging thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, goals, and characteristic modes of action that are recognizable in one's private logic (Shulman & Dreikurs, 1978). Because the term *hidden reasons* implies something that is changeable, it is a more encouraging term than is *basic mistakes* (Powers & Griffith, 1987).

Similar to hidden reasons, Yochelson and Samenow (1976) identified 52 errors in thinking that all of us make when we are irresponsible. The difference with offenders is that they make use of all these errors on a more frequent basis and to a more significant degree. These thinking patterns are crucial for achieving criminal behavior.

Through extensive group interviews with inmates, 12 specific hidden reasons have emerged (Evans & Kane, 1993). These hidden reasons help to form the destructive thinking in a criminal's private logic that permits him or her to commit crimes. Understanding these hidden reasons during counseling can form the basis of the offender's therapy. Following is the list of 12 hidden reasons used in the debate:

1. Money will solve all my problems.
2. If treated unfairly, I have the right to be unfair back.
3. A strong person demands respect from others.
4. I am to be admired and made to feel important despite what I do.
5. My childhood experiences control my current behavior and emotions.
6. An important person has power and control.
7. I have the right to be dependent and others will enjoy taking care of me.
8. People should accept me despite my past behavior (I am a changed person).
9. I must avoid difficulties rather than face them (my life should be trouble free).
10. Because I have been treated poorly, I am not responsible for my actions.
11. Honest people are really dishonest (lawyer, judge, minister).
12. Everyone thinks this way.

Reorientation

The group therapy that follows the debate is aimed at *reorientation* of the offender's thinking. The extent, intensity, and duration of the reorientation phase influence the effectiveness of the sophistry technique (Dreikurs, 1967). During the reorientation phase, group members learn to correct their hidden reasoning so that it is more in line with common sense. This is done through group discussion and relies on the pre- and post questionnaires, the debate, and the videotape. Group members help each other to develop and to practice cognitive skill building that incorporates alternative perceptions, interpretations, and self-statements.

Encouragement is a critical aspect of the reorientation stage (Dreikurs, 1967). The support that group members provide is critical to their rehabilitation, adjustment, and improvement. Encouragement restores their dignity and their worth as human beings. The

group members' fundamental discouragement is at the heart of every hidden reason presented in the debate. This discouragement must be counteracted with encouragement. Encouragement provides a framework for assisting the group members to develop and incorporate social interest (Dreikurs-Ferguson, 1989) and emotional self-reliance (Beecher & Beecher, 1986) into their thinking and behaving. Without encouragement, change becomes impossible. Therefore, it is important for the group leader to ensure that each group member receives some encouragement from the other participants. The format for encouraging group members can vary. What is important is that encouragement becomes an essential part of the reorientation phase (Dreikurs, 1967; Evans, 1995).

Case Example

John was mandated to an offender rehabilitation program after his third incarceration since his 18th birthday. John's family had a history of crime. At the age of 12, his father died a violent death. John, at the age of 17, was involved in a holdup attempt in which his brother was killed. He had been arrested 25 times with offenses including burglary, drugs, auto theft, and armed robbery.

The parole officer monitored John's progress weekly. During John's second individual counseling session, a counselor identified a thinking pattern suggesting that John operated under the hidden reason that money would solve all his problems. When John was asked why his long-term relationships never resulted in marriage, he reported financial reasons. John also stated that the reason for his lack of work was that his employers never paid him what he was worth. He would be on a job a short time, experience financial pressure, and then seek a pay raise. If he did not get a pay raise immediately, he would quit his job.

During the next several individual sessions, the counselor attempted to present John with a hypothesis about his hidden reasons regarding work and intimacy. John countered by using his common sense, recognizing that money would not solve his problems and that everyone must work for a living. Each time the counselor introduced John's hidden reasons, the counselor was stymied by John's common sense response.

John's hidden reasons excluded him from the social demands heeded by responsible people. For instance, John's hidden reasons did not include viewing work as contributing in a mutually beneficial way to society. Instead, work was viewed as selling oneself into slavery. Consequently, John gave up quickly when the job became difficult or the routine became too boring. John found it easier to commit crimes than to obtain money from working. Yet when confronted with these issues, John gave socially acceptable answers and avoided dealing with his problematic behavior. The counselor was kept at bay, and John stayed the same.

Individual counseling became bogged down in John's pleasantries. At this time, John was referred to group therapy provided by the rehabilitation program. The group leader was using the sophistry technique described in this article. The leader divided the group into two teams. John's team was assigned as their second hidden reason the position that "I must have money to solve all my problems." The first hidden reason that was debated generated a lively discussion in which John participated appropriately. The

next topic began with the opposing team speaking against the idea that money solves all problems.

John did not allow the opening speaker to finish his remarks before launching into his rebuttal. He challenged the opposing team to present a problem that could not be solved with money (revealing his hidden reasoning). He argued that if he had money, he would never have gone to prison, citing recent examples of wealthy people (e.g., William Kennedy Smith) who had avoided incarceration. John suggested that he would have no difficulty in relationships with women if he had money. The counselor noted the vehemence with which John debated his point, even violating the stated format in his exuberance. John participated in the remainder of the exercise, although he did not argue as stridently for any other issues.

John could control individual counseling with his common sense remarks. However, it was harder for him to do this in group counseling because his interactions were mirrored and his behavior directly observed by the group. The group experience alone confronted John with his hidden reasons and problematic behavior. At the end of the debate (beginning of the reorientation phase), the counselor asked John to comment on the overall experience. Without further prompting he stated: "I know what you're after, the money thing, and how I raised my voice and all." He then reminded the counselor that his group was assigned to argue for this interfering idea. Another group member pointed out that was true about all the issues. John then acknowledged, "I know it isn't true that money is everything, but I really couldn't think of a damn thing I couldn't have gotten with it." This generated further discussion among the group members, several of whom acknowledged having this hidden reason and the problems it created for them.

Identifying a potential issue for John was the beginning of the counselor's work. For John to explore, examine, and change his hidden reasons, the counselor had to get him beyond common sense. The sophistry therapy helped the counselor and John to tap into his hidden reasons. In the next several group sessions, John worked on reorienting his thinking.

CONCLUSION

Overcoming reluctance to counseling is vital for the involuntary client. The use of hidden reasons in a group debate is a technique used to bypass the client's excuses and to assess their private logic. Although this article focused on offenders, this technique could be used in a similar fashion with any group of involuntary clients. Instead of using the hidden reasons listed in this article, Ellis's (1989) 13 Irrational Beliefs could be used to access group member's hidden reasons.

The sophistry technique is congruent with other cognitive or rational therapies (Beck, 1976; Ellis & Harper, 1977; Glasser, 1975; & Meichenbaum, 1977) used with offenders (Ross, Fabiano, & Ewles, 1988). The general goal of most cognitive therapies is to help the client recognize and modify those thoughts that support maladaptive behavior. The theory is simple: People's thoughts maintain their behavior and feelings (Beck & Weishaar, 1989). The sophistry group technique was designed to examine the thoughts and beliefs of the involuntary client by skirting their explanations to access their

hidden reasons. When this is accomplished, the group members can learn and practice appropriate thinking and behaving.

Studies suggest that most offenders have deficits in cognitive skills (Benekos, 1991; Cohen, 1985; Palmer, 1991). Training in these skills is an essential ingredient for effective correctional programs to reduce recidivism (Ross et al., 1988). Cognitive restructuring, in particular, may have substantial benefits for this population. The challenge is to create an experience for offenders in which they can examine their thinking and the inappropriate behaviors that stem from these thought patterns.

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