Yvonne Agazarian

Yvonne M. Agazarian, EdD, DFAGPA. FAPA, CGP, is Clinical Professor in the Postdoctoral Program in Group Psychotherapy, Adelphi U. She treats, teaches, trains and consults in systems-centered practice. She developed the *Theory of Living Human Systems*; founded the *Systems-centered Training and Research Institute*. She has authored and co-authored seven books and many articles. In 1997 she received the *Group Psychologist of the Year* award from Division 49 of the American Psychological Association "For her involvement in research, publication, teaching and training. She exemplifies the finest in scholarship in the discipline of psychology. As a group psychologist, she has contributed to expanding our knowledge of the boundaries between clinical and social psychology with the investigation of living human systems and systems-centered group and individual therapy. Her considerable body of work illustrates the highest blend of creativity and learning."

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (http://relationalimplicit.com).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge Prengel: Hello, I'm with Yvonne Agazarian. Hi Yvonne.

Yvonne Agazarian: Hello.

Serge Prengel: So , do you want to give us a sense of what SCT is all about?

Y A: Yes, SCT stands for System-Centered Training or Therapy. And if it's SCP, it's System-Centered Practice. And it's a way of experiencing and observing the world through…as if the world is a set of systems.

S P: So… As if the world is a whole set of systems, which is something that seems a little theoretical. But on the other hand, you're also talking about experiencing, so it's like a mixture of these two components.

Y A: That's exactly right. It was started as a theory driven system. So I developed a theory and then something happened in the world—managed care came in. And when managed care came in it was obvious that there was going to be a finite amount of time allocated for patients. And my knowledge is that there's really no way of telling how long a patient is going to need in order to reach the goals. And managed care was clearly going to interfere with that. So I thought that, then, there needed to be a way of developing some kind of system of practice, which enabled people to start, stop and then start again, with the same kind of therapy—not having to change styles of therapy, not having to change therapists. And if they did have to change therapists, it would be less difficult because the way the therapist worked would be similar.

S P: OK, so something that allows people to have therapy, stop, restart again, and a sense of being able to pick up where they left it.

Y A: That's right, that's right. So, I then started to translate the theory into practice and I started to see what it meant if I had the statement of theory, which is a fairly complex statement. It basically says: A theory of living human systems defines a series, a hierarchy of isomorphic systems. And *isomorphy* means that they are similar in structure and function. And why that is important is it means: if I learn something about the system of you, the way you function and the way you structure is going to be the same as the system of me, the same as they system of us, the same of the larger systems we belong to, like a group or an organization, and the way all of those systems function are similar enough so one can generalize what one learns at one level to every other level in the hierarchy.

S P: So, I want to bring it to a level--the way we're talking about systems, we're talking about groups, but in a way—because of the isomorphy—there's going to be something that you're going to learn in your person system and in the body. And so there's something very concrete where it relates to paying attention to the body as well.

Y A: Absolutely. In the practice that we've developed, we look at the stages of development in the system and we predict. This goes through the same stages of development. And then what we do is we reduce the things that get in the way of development. And this is systematic. And the first thing we do is we restore the relationship between the mind and reality testing. And the second thing we do is we restore the relationship with the sensations and experience in the body with the knowledge of what that brings, so that we start to get emotional understanding also. And then the third thing we do is we start to reduce the defenses against frustration, etc

S P: So, for instance when you're talking about the reality testing, do you want to talk a little bit more about how that happens in practice.

Y A: Sure. For each one of undoing the restraining forces, there's a protocol or two. So how we undo anxiety is by saying "Anxiety doesn't come out of the blue." It comes either from a thought, like a negative prediction or mind-read, or from sensations in the body that arouse some kind of anxiety because they're unfamiliar, or the edge of the unknown. So, when you do that, then you can help people do negative predictions…then they come back to reality and reality test. You can get people to understand why sensations in the body are, in fact, upsetting them, when they're simply signals or information that the body is giving the self.

S P: Hmm, so I want to just take this last thing you mentioned—the sensations in the body—and talk a bit about what happens, say in a group, and how you encourage people to stay with the sensation and that notion of "Explore, don't explain".

Y A: Yes. But, first: The way that any system-centered works is by functional sub-grouping, which means that people never work alone. So what they do is they say something, and then they say "Anybody else?". And then the next person that speaks joins them and then adds something of their own. So nobody is alone. So, if in a group we were going to undo…if we were going to legitimize sensations, one of the things we might do is get the group to explore sensations they get when they get anxious. Then they're able to connect the signals of anxiety like dry mouth, cold hands, butterflies in the stomach, light-headedness, with the understanding that what's happening is anxiety. And then, if they undo the anxiety, the system subsides.

S P: OK, so I want to bring it back… You mentioned the system, the idea of sub-grouping, which is very important. So, in an SCT group, people are not alone and they're encouraged to sub-group, to find a group of people who feel similarly…

Y A: Well, this question of exploration… See, you've mentioned "Explain - Explore". Very important. If we explain things, we either tell stories, or we talk about what we know already. Whereas if we explore things, we discover things we don't know yet, or we didn't know we knew. So, functional sub-grouping helps exploration. And then if one person goes as far they can, someone else might take it further.

S P: So, I want to just slow down there for people who don't have the experience of SCT, of an SCT group. This functional sub-grouping is something that's the opposite of, say, the stereotypical sub-grouping of surface similarities.

Y A: That' exactly right, so you don't scapegoat. In stereotypic sub-grouping, there always is an "us and them" or a "me and you"—and it's a push away of the people that are different. But functional sub-grouping depends on building on similarities and gradually incorporating differences.

S P: So, let's stay there for the similarities for a moment. Just I want to, maybe, start a little picture, mental picture, for people who are not familiar with it. In a SCT group, you would encourage a person who speaks. Afterwards you'd say: "Who else?". And people would have the option of either resonating with the person who speaks or starting something different.

Y A: Well if they're going to start something that's different, they do something first. They say to the group, "Is the group ready for a difference?" And if the group is ready, they'll say "Yes," which means that the group can actually listen to the new topic or subject.

S P: OK, so there's a very clear structure of the encouragement of resonating with something, not muddying the water by everybody putting in different voices, and with the understanding that the group is going to be a container, and that everything can be heard.

Y A: You've got it.

S P: OK.

Y A: It's "Yes, and"…rather than "Yes, but". "Yes and"… builds, "Yes but"…is diversifying. So I can say a token "Yes, I really understand you, <u>but</u> I've really got a better idea, which is quite different". Or "Yes, I'm going to *apparently* relate to you but *actually*, I want to go along with my monologue". So, we very rarely use the words "Yes, but." But much more important, we don't do things that a "Yes, but" does. So we're joined, rather than separated.

S P: So that there is a very, very clear indication of what it's like to resonate. And so, as you build a sub-group, you're going to have a strong sense of people feeling the same way. And you have that really well established, at which point you ask the question and another sub-group can form. And there is a sense that the group can tolerate.

Y A: Well, you see what happens very soon once you do sub-grouping, is that people start to feel good because they feel understood. And they develop confidence, and they develop security. And

so therefore, the ambiance or the norms of the group are very favorable to being able to speak up and to take risks, and to say things that you might otherwise not say, or be shy of saying. So what happens very soon, in functional sub-grouping, is that the group develops a climate that is very supportive of being yourself and being authentic and being real.

S P: Yeah, yeah…and I think another part that makes it different from stereotypic grouping is that you can have somebody angry at another person, but the two can be in the same group.

Y A: Absolutely. It very often surprises new people, when they want to get into a fight and then you point out, "Well, you're both in the fighting sub-group." But there's something we've missed.

S P: Yeah…

Y A: And what we've missed is the theoretical underpinning of functional sub-grouping. Because there is a rather important impactful hypothesis in SCT and that is: You only need to know one dynamic if people are going to survive, develop, and transform. And that dynamic is the ability to discriminate and integrate differences.

S P: So, tell me more about the ability to assimilate and integrate differences.

Y A: Well, first you have to recognize the differences and, you know what the human response is to difference? It attacks it, or scapegoats it, or pretends it doesn't exist.

S P: So that's where the avoiding the "yes but" is a way of avoiding anything that dilutes the differences, so that you can face them squarely?

Y A: No, not quite. Because a "yes but" is a difference you see. What we want to do is bring differences in, in such a way so they can be heard and integrated. So what we do by functional sub-grouping is people come together on similarities. And as they're working together, they notice just small differences in what they're saying. So somebody might say, "Well you know, when I get a sensation in my stomach I find I clench it." And someone else will say, "It's funny you should say that, when I get a sensation in my stomach I ignore it." Now there's a difference there, but what the similarity is, is they're exploring their response to a sensation in their stomach.
As people gradually bring in their own stuff, there are small differences. But those differences are small enough to be integrated into the sub-group. Then someone says, "I have a difference, can I bring it in?" And the group says, "Yes!" So they might come straight along and they'll say, "I'm really not interested in physical symptoms in the body. What I'm much more interested in is what I can do with my thoughts." OK, now that is a real difference, you see. It's also an either/or, and an either/or is very divisive, it's very diversified. So then the people who are interested in exploring what happens when they do their thinking -- like they might explore negative predictions causing anxiety. When they start to explore that and they get the small differences, that sub-group learns to integrate differences.

S P: OK.

Y A: OK. Now as the two sub-groups swap backwards and forwards—when one sub-group runs out of energy, the next sub-group starts: when that one runs out energy, the first one goes again.

4

S P: Yeah, I think it's important to remind people that all of this happens within one session. It's not something that happens over time…It really happens in one session…And people are in the same room, they're part of the same group, they're all sitting, for instance, in a circle…We haven't moved people physically together but just…there's a sense of…in a way it's the same thing as when you see the parts…these diagrams of the brain with parts being lit, that you have the people of the sub-group…it's like…

Y A: Exactly. So the group is the container of the differences. And in the mean time, as people are sub-grouping, they're learning to discriminate and integrate differences. And there comes a point where there's a spontaneous recognition that there are similarities between the apparently different sub-groups. And then an integration takes place in the group as a whole. So, for example, they might say, "Oh my God, do you know what…the way I think and the way I feel is actually related…you know… And if I think, I can generate feelings… And if I feel, I can find words for those feelings." But those are actually two different processes, see, and they've integrated and understood something that they didn't understand when they first started.

S P: Yeah, and this has happened by processing similarities and differences to the point where, within the group that's similar, more differences appear… so that, as a result, there's more similarities between the groups who are dissimilar.

Y A: Right, so the full theoretical statement is: By discriminating and integrating differences, that means by noticing differences in what is apparently similar, and similarities in what is apparently different, the system survives, develops, and transforms, from simpler to more complex.

S P: Yes.

Y A: It's a mouthful.

S P: It is. But, in a way, the image that I have with it as you describe it, is it's the same thing as the way we digest, we process food—by cutting it into small bites. And then, the big chunks are easier to assimilate.

Y A: But if it was a sub-group, you see, it would be all the root vegetables got cut into chunks and then carrots, and turnips, and parsnips, OK. And all the vegetables that are not root vegetables, like peas and beans, and maybe some lettuce, and those would be assimilated. And pretty soon people would be eating all over the plate because those differences would not be worrying.

S P: Yes…they start being very different and then they end up all being food… So I want to come back to the part when you were describing what happens in the sub-group, and say: "Well something happens in my stomach, or: Something happens in my chest". So, let's talk a little bit about that…how you pay attention to sensation and how you handle it.

Y A: OK. In the sub-grouping, there's a major, major difference here, which is what we emphasize: That emotions are physical. With every emotion, there is a physical component. And that is different…We discriminate between emotions and feelings. And the feelings are the words we give to an emotion. But once we've given those words, we can think them, and when we say those words, we can also generate the feeling, whether or not the same thing is happening or not. For example, something really bad can happen, and someone can say the word for that is: "I feel, I feel

overwhelmed", OK? And that word is satisfying because it's almost as if one has come up with a container for the experience which represents the experience… And it's a relief to find a word, a feeling word, that describes an emotion. The difficulty is that one can then start to talk to someone in a story, and they can talk about being overwhelmed, they aren't actually overwhelmed, but the word generates the same feeling. So you have two sources of feeling: One is the real sensory-emotional experience that comes from the relationship between the body and the outside world, and the body and the inside world. And you can also have feelings that come simply from the way you think.

S P: So kind of a virtual reality process.

Y A: Yes. So what we do, as we've mentioned before, we make a big distinction between "explaining" and "exploring". So, for example, when people have muscle memory or experiences in the body that come from past experience, which then get repeated in the present even though it doesn't exist. Because you know with the brain… the brain doesn't know the difference between a memory and an actual episode in the present—the brain has the same experience. So when we recall a past experience, we may have the same experience, even though it's not happening now. So, it's in the process of teaching the mind to discriminate between those two things, and then being able to understand what the messages are from the body and what do they mean. So if one gets a stomach ache, it may be that one is scared and that one has sent that fear into the body so one gets a stomachache when one is scared, or one gets a stomachache when one is angry because one's afraid of the anger. Or it may be that one gets a stomachache because one's eaten something wrong, or one gets a stomachache because something is really wrong with us. So, it's important to be able to discriminate between a signal from the body that has to do with now, and signals from the body which have to so with the past.

S P: Right, right. So that's a very important part of just realizing that our instruments basically blind us to…

Y A: What instruments?

S P: The brain, you know…you say that… something from the past… we're not able to discriminate, whether this is something that is happening or whether…

Y A: The brain can't, but our mind can. When we use the…There's a lot of controversy about this so let me be clear about how we use it. We use the "brain" as the physiological sort of programming function. And the "mind" as something one can use to learn to interpret what happens in the brain.

S P: Right. So, through teaching the mind and training the mind…

Y A: Yes, to be observing.

S P: …to be observing, comes the possibility of discriminating whether the experience is something that responds to the environment…

Y A: Or one's inner environment…

S P: …one's inner environment, or whether it is something that is simply reconnecting to memory or past…

Y A: Or it may be that one gets the idea and gives oneself the symptom.

S P: Right, could you talk more about how you train to recognize that?

Y A: Yes, let me think for a moment. Well, the big thing is we start with recognizing the difference between the past and the present. And we also train for recognizing roles… roles of systems… and each role has an experience. So, for example, the roles right now are you're the interviewer and I'm the interviewee, OK. Those are two different roles and they exist in the present, OK. We're also friends—those are different roles and we have past memories of those roles so we feel good about each other in the present. Although we actually haven't earned enough in the present to feel good about each other, We feel as if we have because of the past.
So, why would it be important to know the difference there? The difference would be that it's not enough for us to be friends in the past, we have to be aware of each other. Are we playing useful roles in the present? Am I being a good interviewee? Are you being a good interviewer—in relationship to our goal? Now, if we import the friendly feelings we might not be clear enough about what we should be doing in terms of our goal right here and now. Then the other thing is: We make discrimination between two very important systems—the system of the person, and the system that relates to being a member of an outside context. So you and I are members of outside contexts.

Serge Prengel : Yes.

Y A: And we have clear goals. And our behaviors ideally are oriented to that goal. Now, inside ourselves we could import a role relationship, which wasn't useful. For example: In all of us there is dominance or a submission. If I imported either dominance or a submission, I'd be inviting you to take the other side. So we might end up with you bullying me or me frustrating you, and that wouldn't be to do with our roles here. It would be to do with some look-alike in the past that we have imported into the present. Now the difficulty in doing that is: If we import a role from the past, we have a full experience of what it was like in the past, and we get partially blinded to the present. So we only pick up the information in the present that fits with our experience in the context in the past.

S P: So let me just, maybe give a little bit of a summary, and see if I capture this. In a way, the image that comes to mind is: As we are having a common task, there is a commonality of purpose, and so there is clarity around that.

Y A: And also choosing behaviors that would fit now. Like you just used a questioning behavior, and I'm using a reinforcing behavior by saying "yes, yes." That's appropriate in relationship to the task.

S P: Yes. So in a way it's related to the concept of orienting. As we have a goal, we see it clearly, and we adapt in order to fulfill that goal so we're in alignment and that falls into place.

Y A: Our language would be that "our behaviors are a vector towards the goal".

S P: A vector towards the goal.

Y A: And they come from a role. And we select from that role those vectors that are appropriate to the second.

S P: And the role is appropriate to the goal and the situation.

Y A: Right, because it's in the present.

S P: But, on the other hand, if we import from our past history a role that has nothing to do with the present and the goal, then we're muddying the waters.

Y A: We can. On the other hand, supposing I've had a history as an actress somewhere else. Then I could import the ability to act into this and it might be helpful, or it might start to be artificial. So we wouldn't really know, as we import a past role, whether it's going to be helpful and part of a present work, or whether it's going to get in the way. And the only way that we can tell is by paying attention to the effect of what we do on the present circumstance and the effect towards the goal.

S P: And that's where we come to that observing quality…

Y A: Yes, which we call the "self-observing system".

S P: The self-observing system…

Y A: Different from the ego.

S P: Yes. So let's talk a little bit about the self-observing system…Something like mindfulness?

Y A: No, no. The self-observing system is the developing ability to discriminate and integrate differences. So it's like a mini sub-group inside one's self. Discriminating and integrating differences, so that we can behave appropriately in the present.

S P: So, for instance, we take the example of a conversation—interviewer, interviewee— where does the self-observing system help us pay attention to our roles…in relation to the goal?

Y A: Well, what you're doing is you're keeping an eye on the voice level. Your self-observing system has to discriminate whether it's similar enough to what we need, or whether it's too different that it requires adjustments. It's your self-observing system, like your *researcher*. See, a more popular word is researcher. And you have to be using that part of yourself in order to monitor our behavior. So you can signal to me to change my relationship to the microphone, which I just bumped my nose. That signaled me…My self-observing system noticed that I bumped my nose on the microphone and therefore I needed to change this position.

S P: Right, so then there is this dialogue, that sense of sub-grouping, inside. And, while there is an overarching function that is a larger goal, there are smaller goals that these different sub-groups are dealing with. So, let's come back to the isormorphy and the sense of this physical sensation and the "Explore, don't Explain"…One of the things you do is to encourage people to "contain" and not to "act out". So let's talk a little bit about that…about the impulses, the containing and exploring.

Y A: Let me give you a really good example. I was working with someone who did a lot of massaging his arm. As we were working, whenever it got really tense he'd massage his arm. So when we had a good enough relationship, I said: "Do you have any idea why you're doing that?" And he said: "No". So I said: "Would you be interested in seeing what would happen if you didn't do that?" And so he said yes.

So then he said, "Well, when I don't do it, I get very tense in my shoulder."

So I said: "Well, what happens when you do it?" "Well, the tension in my shoulder goes." So I said: "Are you interested in knowing what the tension in your shoulder is about?" So he said: "Yes." So I said, "Would you describe it?"

He said: "It's a pinching here; actually it's in both shoulders". And I said: "OK. Have you got any idea what that might be? Anything like that ever happen to you?" And he said: "No I don't remember." He said: "I do know one thing", he said, "My mother used to grab us by the shoulders. Now I don't remember her doing that to me, but I've seen her do it with dogs, and I've seen her do it with my younger brothers and sisters—but I don't remember it."

So his shoulders remembered it. And then we went on working with what that meant for him, and what that meant in relationships etc. etc. So what he had there, was he had a displacement activity from the feeling in his shoulder. His feeling in the shoulder was tension and pain. What it meant to him was that he was being grabbed and his whole…wherever, whatever he was doing and whatever he was wanting was interfered with. Then it transferred to: If somebody didn't agree with him, he would stroke his arm, because what was happening to him was: He felt he was being grabbed, he got painful tension in his shoulders, which he displaced onto his arm, which he could then soothe. It was very moving actually. It was very, very moving.

So there is a beautiful example of muscle memory, which is out of consciousness. Related to a role with others, related to the defense against the pain of - - not so much the pain in the shoulders, although that was physically painful - - but the pain of the disruption to be himself. So it was just a beautiful example of how the body, and how his relationship to what was happening in his body managed to soothe himself in the present, but at the same time kept him distant from anybody by whom he felt grabbed.

S P: So in a way …you see that as a way of importing that episode from the past into the present through the physical sensation.

Y A: Absolutely. And there's an awful lot of that. You know our past…the other thing that it physical…there are different postures that go with roles. And if we're not aware of them, we send out a role signal, which invites the reciprocal response. So, for example, if I sit back and look down my nose at you, with my arms folded and my legs crossed, you're going to feel either the impulse to fight me and put me down… or you're going to feel the impulse to go one down and be sort of humbled. If, on the other hand, I look up at you up under my eyebrows, you know duck right down and look under my eyebrows, your eyes are going to want to look after me, or you're going to want to get rid of me because I'm a nuisance. So our role postures in our body stimulate other people to take the other side of the role posture. And we call that role-locks.

S P: Role locks…

Y A: Yes, you get locked into a reciprocity of roles. So what we try to do is to become aware of our behavioral postures, which then gives us an insight into where we are repeating a role. And the same is with our voice turns.

S P: So, what you want to just say there… As you are aware of your posture, what's interesting is not just to see it as posture, or even to see it as something you inherit from the past, but to see it as something which you actually are unconsciously active in creating something among other people.

Y A: Yes, and we'll give you a look-alike to what happened in the past with someone else.

S P: Yeah…so it's a way of restoring a sense of agency because instead of just simply feeling passive about this role, you discover that it exists and you have the possibility of even doing it.

Y A: That's right. And you can stop inviting people to either bully or go one down to you or etc. etc.

S P: Right. So very much a sense of…You are not just looking at your person system, or looking at you or your parents… But you are seeing how changing that understanding of your person system can change your interpersonal system with other people.

Y A: Absolutely. And there's another aspect of that which is listening to one's voice tone. If one, for example, if one starts to hear one's self talking: "Well I'm so frustrated about that and look what they're doing"… Do you hear the voice tone? Do you see? Now that voice tone tells you you've gone into a victim role.
Or you get sharp and you say something like "Well, I don't know why you did that," OK? You've gone into a dominant role. So, after a while it's not as if you're really listening. It's like on the back burner; it's an awareness that your voice tone is flagging something that you don't really want to act out. So then you recognize that the voice tone is signaling that you've gone into a role, and that the role is inviting others to take the other side, and that you are now in a repetition, which is not good for you, and which you don't really want to be in. And also notice how seductive it is to go back to those old roles…

S P: Because there's a groove…

Y A: Yes, there's a groove. Yes there is. But all of that is done in sub-grouping, you see. And the longer the group is together, and the more sub-groups work, the more unbearable realities about us become bearable, because they're shared, they're human, and they're common. So after a little while one can look at one's sadism, one look at one's masochism, one doesn't necessarily use those words. One can look at the impulse, the murderous impulses we have when we're frustrated, which previously we may not even have been aware of and just turned back and become depressed. So with functional sub-grouping, overtime in a group, there's really nothing about being human that we can't explore, including really difficult things like, what would it be like to be a commandant in a concentration camp? Can one explore the part of one's self that might've done that efficiently, which is a horrendous idea if you just begun it. But, if you moved on the pipe, pretty soon you are able to resonate with and understand all the ways a human being behave without scapegoating them.

S P: Because everything that is in you exists also outside…

Y A: That's right. And everything outside exists in you.

S P: Yes, so there is no sense of…You know there's a sense of support for exploring it.

Y A: And, you know, both the admiration and triumph and the pain and horror of being human…It's important for us to be fully human. The fantasy is that if we worked more like this we might be able to do something about the way that we are so wedded to wars and so wedded to violence and so wedded to programs and things like that. Because as human beings we keep acting that over and over again. We keep making it "them and us," "us and them." And that's the hatred we have of differences, which is why we come back over and over again. That instead of scapegoating differences, one has to learn to discriminate them, understand them, and integrate them. Instead of scapegoating them.

S P: Yeah, yeah. Scapegoating them within the context of a group and within the context of one's self and within the context of society at large.

Y A: You got it. You got it. It's very, very hard work. People who are in training in SCT, it takes a while—it takes quite a long while, and it takes a lot of work. But you know what I've found… because you know I started as a psychoanalyst… So in my early days I was aware of how much human suffering there was. And, also, there is some suffering in watching that much suffering. Since I've worked with SCT, people get to the same place—sometimes deeper than I was able to get them as a psychoanalyst, and often much more broadly—without that same level of suffering, because it is done in a containing, empathic, attuned sub-group. So it's bearable. What was hardly bearable for some of my patients on the couch, I don't see that happening in working with SCT. Things are unbearable.

S P: So I want to make a distinction here. When you talk about SCT, do you talk in this case about SCT as practiced in a group, or also SCT practiced in individual therapy?

Y A: Yeah, and with one's self. So it's in a group… in an organization… See, for example, if you take an organization your team as part of the department, as part of the organization, each of them have the same issues to deal with. Although because their contexts are different, their issues will be different. But the way they need to deal with them will be the same.

S P: Mmm. So, coming back from there to what you were saying about how SCT makes it possible to understand or deal with problems…

Y A: Human problems.

S P: Human problems, yeah.

Y A: With less pain. That's my impression, you know. I believe it's true because that's my experience with it. Other people may find it different from that.

S P: But one of things I see in addition to the theory itself -- that one of the flavors, one of the things of SCT, one of the things you have given to SCT -- is a sense of… a poetic sense almost… with expressions. You know, when you talk about something like "sitting at the edge of the unknown"," explore don't explain"… There's kind of a quality that… language has a way of taking somebody out of the familiar role of "I'm suffering"… you know.

Y A: Yes. The other thing we do is we don't diagnose. I mean we do diagnose, but we don't use diagnostic labels, which could be felt as pejorative. So we don't do that. We use much more

"driving and restraining forces". "What's getting in your way from meeting your goal?" See, and "what's the drive?" And the idea, very important from Kurt Lewin: If you reduce the restraining forces, the drive towards the goal just naturally moves on. So if you reduce the restraining forces to survival development from transformation, the drive just automatically moves towards development.

S P: Mmm. So there's a very… almost a built up sense of movement, you know, that's there… In a way that, when you talk about other forms of therapy is not necessarily there?...

Y A: Well, I think it's there, in its own way. We've just spent a lot of time finding the language, finding the attitude, recognizing that the only difference between the patient and the therapist is the role. The role of the therapist is to get training so that they can help the patient explore and discover what's in the way of them getting what they want.
So there's a little buzzword we use "Me structure. You energy." So, my job as a therapist is to provide the structure. Your job, as the patient, is to use my structure with your energy to get what you want, because my structure are a series of hypotheses that, if you do this, it's easier to get that. See? So we are very clear about structure like, all our groups use functional sub-grouping, whether they want to or not. If they don't use functional sub-grouping, they can't be an SCT group, because the process of an SCT group is to discriminate and integrate differences, instead of scapegoating them.
So, "Me structure. You energy": Me giving you the fork in the road of choice, you making any choice you want except the choice of not to choose. OK? So the structure is very clear. You've got to choose, but which way you're going is entirely up to you, whether I think it's the right way or not. My opinion is no good. My structure is where it matters. So you function, me structure.

S P: So that's a good way to put the…sense of creating a structure and embodying it. And as you do that, it's something that happens between the leader and the group, or between the therapist and the patient, but also then gets absorbed by isomorphy inside the individual.

Y A: Yes, yes. For example, the time boundaries, the structure of time. We try to start and stop on time. Now, starting on time is one of the hardest things for a group, particularly a big group. And the groups that don't start or stop on time have a different character, because if they don't start on time, nobody really knows when it's going to begin, so it starts later and later and later. And if doesn't stop on time, people never know whether they're going to be able to put their nickel in the pocket, sorry that's age, a quarter in the parking machine. So we're very clear about the structure of space and time.
Mostly, groups that we work with come on time and leave on time. Now, over time that starts to erode and we have to re-establish the structure.
But something that interests me very much about, for example, what happened in a fairly recent group of about twenty, twenty-five people, who have been working for about 5 or 6 years together, some coming and going—new members coming, others leaving—this semester the group decided that it wanted to give presentations rather than having first theory -- in which I would give them the theory and they would discuss what I gave them. They decided they would do presentations all by themselves. They organized themselves so that two people did a presentation every session. I've never seen that. I've never seen a group of people decide that they want to give themselves the assignment, and they are doing beautifully—absolutely beautifully.

S P: So was it a group that had passed the authority issue?

Y A: Yes, yes. Yes it was a group that had done the authority issue.

S P: So, as we are… Do you want to find a way to end?…

Y A: I'd like to put one more thing in, which is the phases of system development. If one knows what phase the system is in, one doesn't give the system things that it can't do.   And, of course, it fluctuates, you know. A group may have gone all the way through to the work phase, but may for a period work in the flight phase. So if you would just…What you require, what you're putting at the group to solve—the goals of the group—if you adjust those to what the group could do, there really is not much of a failure experience. And you can always keep reducing the restraining force in that phase so it could move on to the next. So understanding the phases of system development is a very relieving thing to do for a therapist, because the therapist doesn't have to be so bewildered about what the group is doing.

S P: Right, it gives the therapist a structure and the context…Paying attention to the context… the theory functions as a structure. So that in a way the therapist is not alone with their group, but is held by the larger group of the experience of SCT.

Y A: That is exactly right. And we have a little… No it's quite big actually. Any member of SCT can call up a licensed member or an experienced member for a ten-minute consult on the telephone, anytime they want to. And if the person they've called up has the time, the energy, and the resources, they'll do a ten-minute consult. So nobody is alone in SCT. We also do an enormous amount of work on the bridge, which is the ability to phone in and have a conference call. Now because we are so spread over America and also in Scandinavia and England, we do a lot of work on the telephone, and we thought that was going to be very difficult. But in fact, one knows the voices, and one can hear when someone's gone into a role from the voice turn, and we can ask them: "Are you suddenly in a role?" So we do a lot of work in lots of different ways, making contact with each other when we need to as well as the formal get-togethers in the conferences.

S P: Good. Thanks Yvonne.

Y A: You're welcome.

🖙   *This conversation was transcribed by Nisha Kochar.*