Systems-Centered's Functional Subgrouping and its Neurobiology

Susan P. Gantt, Ph.D., ABPP, CGP, FAGPA, FAPA
Director, Systems-Centered® Training and Research Institute
sgantt@systemscentered.com

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCING SYSTEMS-CENTERED THERAPY .......................................................... 1

FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPING: CONFLICT RESOLUTION ............................................. 2

* SUBGROUPING EXERCISE: PUSH, WAVE & ROW .................................................. 3

* ACTIVE LISTENING: “EARN THE PEN” EXERCISE .................................................. 4

FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPING ..................................................................................... 5

FUNCTIONS OF MIDDLE PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX ..................................................... 7

SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL BRAIN SUBSYSTEMS ........................................................... 8

BRAIN UNDER STRESS .............................................................................................. 9

* UNDOING DISTRACTIONS: CROSSING BOUNDARIES IN TIME & SPACE .............. 10

* UNDOING ANXIETY FROM NEGATIVE PREDICTIONS ............................................ 12

* COMPASSION FOR THE SELF ............................................................................... 14

DRIVING & RESTRAINING FORCES FOR SUPPORTING NEUROPLASTICITY ............. 16

DEVELOPING THE GROUP MIND (ABSTRACT) .......................................................... 17

SUGGESTED READINGS ............................................................................................ 19

For more information on Systems-Centered Training & SCTRI:
Contact Susan P. Gantt at sgantt@systemscentered.com
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Systems-Centered Training and Research Institute, Inc., a non-profit organization.
INTRODUCING SYSTEMS-CENTERED THERAPY
Developed by Yvonne M. Agazarian, Ed.D.

Systems-centered practice is developed from a theory of living human systems and tests the hypothesis that systematically modifying defenses, in the context of the phases of system development, will reduce the forces that inhibit change and release the drive so that it can be directed towards the goals of change.

**Systems-centered therapy (SCT)**

Systems-centered therapy assumes that self-centeredness is the major source of personal and interpersonal pain. SCT enables a shift from self-centered relationships to an increased awareness of the self in a systems-centered context. Every context has its own goals, and every change in goal requires a corresponding change in role, if people are to relate to each other in a goal-oriented way. With systems-centered awareness comes an increasing ability to make the transitions in relationships that are required in the multiple contexts of every day, both at home and at work.

Systems-centered therapy systematically weakens the restraining forces to change by modifying defenses in a structured sequence that paces the patient’s ability to choose. In the process of modifying each defense, the patient acquires skills that increase their ability to undo their own defenses. As each defense is undone, the patient is able to take the fork-in-the-road away from the symptoms, generated by their defensive responses; and towards discovering the conflicts, between their impulses and the fears of their impulses, that were defending against. Through this process, patients regain their ability to use their common sense (and existential humor!) to manage the everyday conflicts between themselves and reality.

Clear outcome criteria for each step in the sequence of defense modification locates the patient in the SCT treatment plan. Because each defense modification addresses a specific and different symptom, therapy can be delivered either continuously or chunked into modules. SCT can therefore be applied to the goals of both short-term and long-term therapy.
FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPING
A SYSTEMS-CENTERED APPROACH TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Asking "why are you saying that?"
or "tell me more about that!"
is a little like giving another member's boat a
push out to sea.

Saying "I'm in your subgroup"
is like an encouraging wave from the shore.

Working as a member of your subgroup
is more than pushing another member's boat out to sea
or waving encouragingly from the shore.

Working in a subgroup
is getting into the boat and rowing too!

All living human systems develop, mature and transform through the process of recognizing
differences and integrating them. Functional Subgrouping is a new technique for resolving conflicts
in living human systems: individuals, groups, departments, organizations and all other levels of the
system hierarchy.

All living human systems transform from simple to complex by the process of integrating differences:
recognizing both the differences in the apparently similar and the similarities in the apparently
different.

All subgroups naturally come together around similarities and separate around differences. Stereotype subgroups scapegoat differences: black and white; up and down; them and us. Functional
subgroups integrate differences: us and us.

Functional subgroups manage change by splitting group conflicts between alternating subgroups. Every member joins the subgroup that is working with the side of the conflict that has most meaning
for them. Joining on similarities instead of attacking differences creates a good working climate.

As each subgroup explores their similarities they recognize and integrate small differences among
their members. As the subgroups integrate differences, they develop from simpler to more complex. As the capacity to recognize and integrate differences increases within the subgroups, so does the
capacity to recognize similarities in what was apparently different between subgroups. When this
occurs there is an integration in the system-as-a-whole.

The advantage of functional subgrouping is that no member works unsupported. No member needs to
take things just personally. When one member rests, another subgroup member takes the next step
in problem solving and when the member is ready again, he or she can join the subgroup work again.
Every step a member takes is for himself - for his subgroup - and for the group-as-a-whole.

The process of functional subgrouping resolves conflicts in any change process, at all levels of living
human systems: individuals, couples, small groups, large groups, departments, organizations and
nations.
SUBGROUPING EXERCISE: HOW TO "PUSH," "WAVE" AND "ROW"
Introductory Exercise for the First Phase of System Development

Goal: To tell the difference between functional subgrouping and stereotype subgrouping!
Functional Subgrouping encourages people to mindfully join and build on each other’s communications.
Stereotype or social subgrouping is not mindfully aware.

Break up into groups of three members. There are three roles in each small group: talker, responder and observer. The Talker always starts. The responder responds differently in each exercise. The observer observes. Everybody gets a turn. To keep things clean, identify yourselves as A, B, and C.

Pushing someone's boat out to sea:
* Asking "Why are you saying that?" or "Tell me more about that!" is a little like giving another member’s boat a push out to sea.
* Whatever the talker does or says, the responder will respond with a question while the observer observes. Do three rounds so that everyone gets a turn.
  - A talks ... B questions, C observes
  - B talks ... C questions, A observes
  - C talks ... A questions, B observes
* Take a minute or so between each round to see what you discovered.

Waving from the shore:
* Saying “I’m in your subgroup” is like an encouraging wave from the shore.
* Whatever the talker does or says, the responder responds with token comments like "uh huh," "hmmm," "me too," “I know what you mean" so that the other person keeps on talking. Do three rounds so that everyone gets a turn.
  - A talks ... B “uh huhs,” C observes
  - B talks ... C “uh hs,” A observes
  - C talks ... A “uh huhs,” B observes
* Take a minute or so between each round to see what you discovered.

Getting into the boat and rowing too!
* Working as a member in your subgroup is more than pushing another member’s boat out to sea or waving encouragingly from the shore. Working in a subgroup is getting into the boat and rowing, too!
  - Take five minutes to talk together in your small group, and build on each other with attunement to each. “Row” your boat by putting your “oar” in so that you keep pace with the rhythm, depth and intensity. Try not to leave any silences that might leave someone “dropped.” At the end of five minutes take some time for “what did you discover?”

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ACTIVE LISTENING: “EARN THE PEN” EXERCISE

Goal: To experience the differences between listening -- reflecting the heart of another’s message -- and interpreting or parroting it.

Listening to another’s message is not always as easy as it sounds. For extra practice in listening rather than interpreting, you could try out this “earn the pen” exercise. It is designed to help us to paraphrase what our partner said without either parroting or interpreting our partners’ meaning. Success comes when your partner has said that he or she feels understood.

It feels very good to be understood! It also helps to show it. So when it is your turn to be paraphrased, remember to give your partner spontaneous clues: a nod or a smile when you feel understood, a slight shake of the head when you don’t. In the exercise below the partners are named Dick and Jane!

Dick holds the pen and talks to Jane.

Jane Listens.

Jane then paraphrases Dick’s message.

IF ... Dick feels that Jane’s paraphrase fit his message, then (and only then!) does Dick give Jane the pen.

IF... Dick feels that Jane’s paraphrase does not reflect his message, then...

Dick repeats the part of the message he felt was either left out or misinterpreted.

Jane then tries again. This continues until Dick feels understood (Very important not to compromise!).

Dick then gives Jane the pen.

When Jane has earned the pen it is her turn to say something.

It is then Dick’s turn to listen and paraphrase.

Continue until each of you can accurately reflect each other and it feels good.

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FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPING

Goal: To discriminate and integrate differences instead of scapegoating them.
Integrating the differences in what is apparently similar and the similarities in what is apparently different is the process that enables us (and all living human systems) to survive and develop.

Saying “anyone else” when we have said what we want to say encourages others to join us and build on our contributions. Building on each other’s ideas builds functional subgroups which in turn help us to integrate our differences.

Say “anyone else” when you have finished saying what you want to say.

Look around so that everyone in the group feels invited to join you.

Don’t give up if it takes time for someone in the group to join you.

When you are joined, expect the person who joins you to reflect what you said.
Being reflected tells you whether you have been understood...
If you feel understood, nod, to signal that you feel joined, and it feels good.

If you don’t feel joined, say so!
Speak up! And let the joiner know if you don’t feel joined.
Work together to get a good enough join.
It is resonant joining that builds functional subgroups.

When you join someone else, reflect what they said.
Keep in eye contact when you join.
When you meet another’s eyes you meet each other’s energy.
It is energy that builds a subgroup.

Once you have joined, separate and look to the group.
When you have been joined, the next step is to build with your own experience.
As you find your own words, look around at the group.
Work along with your subgroup as it builds itself.
When you build with your own ideas, you bring energy into the subgroup.

Stay attuned to your subgroup.
If you lose touch with your subgroup, say so!
Ask the working subgroup to put up their hands so you can rejoin them.
When you no longer resonate with your subgroup, say so.
Say “I dropped out of the subgroup.”
It is important for subgroup members to know where the energy of the subgroup is, so it is important for you to let them know when your energy has gone!

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When you have a difference…
   Ask if there is room for a difference.
   If the answer is “not yet,” wait until the group is ready.
   (If the group is not ready there will not be energy to work.)
   Hold on to your difference until the group is ready.
   Test the water every so often so that the group doesn’t forget.

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES, WHICH COME EASIER FOR YOU?
   Some of us are more attuned to similarities than we are to differences. Some of us are more attuned to differences than we are to similarities. One way to tell is by observing how we tend to subgroup.

SIMILARITIES
   When you want to join every subgroup as it passes you by, think twice!
   Some of us are more attuned to similarities than we are to differences. This tendency is related to our attachment style, and leaves us with a tendency to ignore some of the differences between ourselves and others that it might be important to pay attention to. This tends to leave us open to disappointment when we discover that our relationships are not as close as we thought they were. One benefit of learning how to subgroup functionally is the opportunity it gives us to develop the part of us that notices differences as well as similarities. There are always differences in what is apparently similar, and similarities in what is apparently different.

   It is important to be able to see both similarities and differences.
   Some of us experience similarities much more easily than differences; therefore, it is easy for us to see the similarity between us and every other subgroup. Learning to subgroup functionally means seeing both similarities and differences. The subgrouping challenge is to notice the inklings that let you become aware that you could also join a different subgroup. Take opportunities to start a different subgroup. It takes practice!

DIFFERENCES
   When no subgroup is quite right …
   Some of us are more attuned to differences than we are to similarities. This tendency is related to our attachment style, and leaves us with a tendency to ignore some of the similarities between ourselves and others. This tends to leave us feeling somewhat unrelated and alienated and alone. One benefit of learning how to subgroup functionally is the opportunity it gives us to develop the part of us that notices similarities between ourselves and others, so that we experience some common humanity. One way to do this is to work to build on others rather than split away from them.
Functions: Middle Pre-Frontal Cortex

The nine functions of the middle pre-frontal cortex according to Daniel Siegel are as follows:

1. Body Regulation
2. Attunement
3. Emotional Balance
4. Response Flexibility
5. Empathy
6. Self-knowing
7. Awareness
8. Fear Extinction
9. Intuition
10. Morality

Figure 1. Brain subsystems important in social and emotional functioning. Adapted from Being a Brain-wise Therapist: A Practical Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology, by Badenoch, 2008, New York, NY: Norton. Reprinted with permission of artist.
BRAIN UNDER STRESS

a Prefrontal regulation during alert, non-stress conditions

DMPFC
- Reality testing
- Error monitoring

DLPPC
- Top-down guidance of attention and thought

HPFC
- Inhibition of inappropriate actions

VMPFC
- Regulating emotion

b Amygdala control during stress conditions

Loss of prefrontal regulation

Bottom-up attention

Emotional habits

Stratum

Hypothalamus

Amygdala

Emotional reflexes

Emotional associations

NA

CA
UNDOING DISTRACTIONS: Crossing Boundaries in Time and Space
Basic Protocol for Initial Phases of System Development

Goal: Crossing boundaries in time and space into the systems-centered member role

Crossing a boundary into the present requires taking one’s attention and energy away from the past, away from the future and away from outside concerns, and bringing it into the here-and-now context. When the boundary into the present is crossed, making eye contact with others is the first step towards a shared and resonant experience with oneself and others. Survival, development and transformation of oneself as a system depend upon the flow of energy-information between oneself, others and the social context.

Do you find yourself distracted by anything right now that is keeping your energy out of the present?

If... the answer to the question is given in factual, descriptive language, skip to the question below.

If... the answer to the question is:

vague, full of emotion, related to thoughts rather than descriptive fact, encourage ‘the researcher’ in the person to recognize difference between facts and feelings. If needed, explain the difference between facts and feelings.

If... it is too difficult for the person to tell the difference between facts and feelings, avoid a failure experience, end the exercise, and ask them to look at each group member and notice their experience while they are looking. Then ask: are you more here, less here, or the same? If the answer is “less” or “the same” ask if there is another distraction.

What is your distraction? Give the facts first, feelings second.

How do you feel about these facts?

How do you feel for yourself that, as for us all, your thoughts can take you away from your here-and-now experience?

What feeling would you like to bring into your relationships here?

Meet the eyes of the people here, one by one, and bring your feeling into your relationship with them.

After the eye contact is completed, ask: Are you more here, less here, or the same?

IF... the answer is “less” or “the same” ask if there is another distraction.

IF... the answer is “more here,” review the steps: Make up your mind to change your brain. By reducing the restraining forces to coming fully into the here-and-now you will be developing new neural pathways in your brain which will enable you to have a fuller experience of your life.

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DISTRACTIONS are thoughts that are outside the boundary of the present moment. There are many kinds of distractions: distractions from the past, present or future. When we are distracted, we are no longer able to use past information to help us to understand the present, or look to the future to test the hypotheses that might help us to explain the present.

The problem with ‘outside’ thoughts is that they arouse emotions as we think about them. Both the thoughts and the emotions distract us from experiencing what is ‘really’ going on inside us and outside us. (The brain does not know the difference between present experience and past memories: they both ‘feel’ the same.) Thoughts that drift to the past or to the future are often attempts to find an explanation for something in the present that we are uncertain about. Unfortunately they get in the way of our curiosity and our common sense explanation.

Using this map to trace how we can time travel in our mind can make us mindful. We can then make up our mind to change our brain, so that we can develop the neural pathways that allow us to use our energy to experience the many dimensions of our present.
UNDOING ANXIETY FROM NEGATIVE PREDICTIONS
Basic Protocols for the Flight Subphase of System Development

Goal: To reduce uncertainty by exploring it, rather than explaining it.
Unfortunately, when our explanations take the form of untested negative predictions we actually raise anxiety in the present, while positive predictions encourage us to avoid reality testing our present. Negative and positive predictions deprive us of our exploratory drive and our common sense.

In SCT, anxiety is understood as a signal that there is a misinterpretation of reality: a response to paper tigers and not to the real tigers of our experience.

Feelings feel the same, whether they come from our sensory-emotional experience of our interactions with the world around us, or whether they come from our thoughts about our experience: past or present. We often do not notice the difference! For our brain, all feelings are here-and-now! It is therefore important to learn to tell the difference between feelings that are triggered by our thoughts and feelings that relate to the sensory experience of our context.

The anxiety exercises help us to use our mind to locate the source of our anxiety and to tell the difference between the paper tigers that make us anxious, and the real tigers of our experience that we need to pay attention to.

You seem anxious. Are you?

Do you know that anxiety does not come out of the blue?
It probably comes from one of three sources: anxiety-provoking thoughts; anxiety responses to unfamiliar sensations; or anxiety at uncertainty itself (we call this the edge of the unknown). Can you turn on your researcher and see if you are thinking something that makes you anxious?

Will you please say out loud the words you are saying to yourself?
When the words match a negative prediction, continue with the exercise.
If the thought is a mind read, uneasiness about sensations, or uncertainty about the unknown, turn to the appropriate exercise.

You are making a negative prediction. Negative predictions are anxiety-provoking thoughts, and all anxiety-provoking thoughts provoke anxiety!

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Now let us turn on the researcher. Do you believe you can predict the future?
If the shift from rationalization to exploration is not made, and if the person says that they do believe that they can tell the future, see footnote 1.

Now that you know that you don’t believe you can tell the future, do you feel better? Worse? Or the same?

IF... the answer is “worse” or “the same,” see if there is another anxiety-provoking thought and repeat the exercise.

All anxiety-provoking thoughts about the future or the past are defenses against the present.

How do you feel that all of us human beings have a tendency to explain the present instead of explore it? And how do you feel for yourself that you make yourself anxious through your thoughts and not your present experience?

Pause... so that there is time to understand the cost of negative predictions.

IF ... there is a difficulty in experiencing a feeling for oneself, refer to the compassion protocol.

Do you know what it is about the reality of the present that you moved away from?
Give the person time to work.

Will you center yourself, and take a moment to make a commitment to change this pattern and to use this exercise to undo your anxiety when you make negative predictions?

Review the steps. Make up your mind to change your brain: By reducing the negative predictions that are a flight from the unknowns of the present you will be developing new neural pathways in your brain.

_____________________

1Support the ability to predict the future from past experience and work with statistical probability: “are you accurate 100% of the time?” If the answer is “no,” ask - “can you tell whether this particular time will be the one in a hundred when your events do not go as you predicted?” If the answer is ”yes” - explore the person’s experience around knowing the future. Maintain a resonant connection with them without judgment. (It is very rare that a person will not allow any possibility of error. If this should happen, this exercise will not be useful to them, and the appropriate response is to contain them and use a different approach.)
COMPASSION FOR THE SELF
The Compassion Protocol: An Adjunct To All The Protocols In This Manual

Goal: To experience the emotional impact of intellectual understanding. This ‘compassion for the self’ exercise connects comprehensive understanding to apprehensive experience, so that the protocols can be integrated.

It is important in SCT to understand that although one can change one’s thoughts or behavior by following the skill sheets, deep change does not occur unless one experiences the emotion one feels about having the difficulty. In other words, left brain insight is not enough\(^1\), the right brain emotional experience must also be available if the energy for change is to be available. SCT protocols will not support change unless they are connected to emotional insight which is necessary for integration.

Do you have compassion for yourself that you, and all us human beings, have automatic responses to frustration, that make things worse by ____ (negative predictions, tension, depression, retaliatory impulses, role locks, blind trust, blind mistrust etc.)?

**IF …** the person can experience compassion for the self, ask:

You are feeling compassion – do you know what feeling you are experiencing that arouses your compassion?

Where do you experience your feeling physically in your body?

Will you go deeply into the feeling inside yourself so that you can experience it fully?

**What do you now know?**

With existential experience comes an awareness both of context and an understanding of the realities of the context. It is at this point that the person can see the situation objectively and also see the many sides of the issue. The frustrating situation is no longer taken just personally, and an understanding of how to respond to the situation is available – as well as a judgment about the attuned, empathic and appropriate action.

**IF …** the person cannot experience compassion for the self, ask how they feel for you.

How do you feel for me, that being human, I also make myself anxious, or frustrated, or anguishied by ____ (making negative predictions, or locking myself up inside tension, or turning my anger back on myself and getting depressed … etc.,)?

**IF …** the person can feel compassion for you, ask …

How do you feel for yourself that you can have compassion for me, but not for yourself?

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\(^1\) Emotions generated by the ‘explanations’ generated in the pre-frontal cortex ‘feel’ the same as the sensory generated experiences in the amygdala.
IF... the person does not have a feeling ...
Are you curious about how you learned to ignore your feelings for yourself and for others?
Accessing curiosity, the exploratory drive, creates the internal context in which the next steps can be taken as they emerge.

Review the Steps.

Whatever answer the person gives in response to the questions about compassion for the self, compassion for another, or no feeling response at all, introduce the fact that connecting feelings for the others and oneself is basic to being able to change oneself. Intellectual knowledge or behavioral modification alone is not enough. Staying curious about our own emotional and existential experience builds new pathways in the brain. We then gain access to both our comprehensive and apprehensive knowledge.
## DRIVING AND RESTRAINING FORCES FOR SUPPORTING NEUROPLASTICITY in SYSTEMS-CENTERED GROUPS

### Novelty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRIVING FORCES</th>
<th>RESTRAINING FORCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joining on similarities</td>
<td>“Yes, but” communications and reacting to differences with no alternative fork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring what you do not yet know</td>
<td>Explaining what you already know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activating curiosity</td>
<td>Negative predictions or pull to “certainty”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing fork to the new and unknown</td>
<td>Redundancy, no viable fork other than the known</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making new discriminations</td>
<td>Using old frames for one’s experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making room for differences</td>
<td>Stereotyping or attacking differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weakening negative predictions and other triggers to invariant cortical representations</td>
<td>Closing one’s mind and reiterating invariant cortical representations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Moderate Emotional Arousal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRIVING FORCES</th>
<th>RESTRAINING FORCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joining or being joined on one’s feelings</td>
<td>High reactivity, cannot take in or send info to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing one’s feelings as not just personal, seeing the bigger picture</td>
<td>Personalizing one’s feelings and experience and lose the bigger picture (amygdala activation, narrowing of vision)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centering and turning on curiosity and researcher</td>
<td>Low road, no middle prefrontal cortex “online”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centering</td>
<td>Getting quiet, no eye contact and pulling energy out of the group, withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naming one’s feelings</td>
<td>Flooded, feeling with no words, or intellectual with no feeling information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovering compassion for one’s self</td>
<td>Criticizing one’s self or others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Secure Relational Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DRIVING FORCES</th>
<th>RESTRAINING FORCES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asking others to join one’s experience</td>
<td>Keeping one’s experience to one’s self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking at others one’s subgroup and making eye contact</td>
<td>Looking down and away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining others with emotional resonance</td>
<td>Focusing on differences and not similarities with others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DEVELOPING THE GROUP MIND THROUGH
FUNCTIONAL SUBGROUPING:
LINKING SYSTEMS-CENTERED® TRAINING (SCT)
AND INTERPERSONAL NEUROBIOLOGY

Susan P. Gantt, Ph.D.
Emory University School of Medicine and
Systems-Centered Training and Research Institute

Yvonne M. Agazarian, Ed.D.
Systems-Centered Training and Research Institute

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This article introduces the systems-centered concept of the “group mind” by linking systems-centered thinking and interpersonal neurobiology, building on Siegel’s definition of mind as the process of regulating the flow of energy and information. Functional subgrouping, the systems-centered group method for resolving conflicts, discriminates and integrates the flow of energy and information within and between group members, subgroups, and the group-as-a-whole, thus potentiating survival, development, and transformation. This article uses the interpersonal neurobiological framework to discuss functional subgrouping as a tool for developing the group mind: considering how functional subgrouping facilitates emotional regulation, creates a secure relational context, and potentiates neural integration.

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Neurobiology and Building Interpersonal Systems:
Groups, Couples and Beyond

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS:

Susan P. Gantt, Ph.D.
Paul Cox, MD

Introduction………………………………………………………………. Susan P. Gantt, Ph.D.
Paul Cox, MD

Integrating Interpersonal Neurobiology
with Group Psychotherapy…………………………………………….. Bonnie Badenoch, MA, LMFT
Paul Cox, MD

Developing the Group Mind
through Functional Subgrouping:
Linking Systems-Centered Training (SCT)
and Interpersonal Neurobiology………………………………………… Susan P. Gantt, Ph.D.
Yvonne M. Agazarian, Ed.D.

Mirror Neurons:
Their Implications for Group Psychotherapy……………………….. Victor L. Schermer, MA

Group Psychotherapy and Neuro-Plasticity:
An Attachment Theory Perspective…………………………………… Philip J. Flores, Ph.D.

Introducing Couples to Group Therapy:
Pursuing Passion through the Neo-Cortex………………………….. Don Ferguson, Ph.D.

COMMENTARY
Reflections on Mind, Brain and Relationships
in Group Psychotherapy:
A Discussion of Bonnie Badenoch and Paul Cox’s paper
“Integrating Interpersonal Neurobiology with Group Psychotherapy”….. Daniel J. Siegel, Ph.D.

COMMENTARY
Group and the Social Brain:
Speeding Toward a Neurobiological
Understanding of Group Psychotherapy…………………………….. John W. Denninger, MD, Ph.D.


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