There's No Place Like Group: *The Wizard of Oz* as a Counselor Education Tool

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**Abstract**—This article analyzes *The Wizard of Oz* in terms of stages of group development, therapeutic factors, and prototypical member roles, recommending this popular movie as a tool for group counselor education. Because the film has become so culturally ingrained, it provides a concrete schema through which beginning group workers are able to more quickly understand and connect complex abstract processes to an already familiar framework.

Elements of group process and the sociology of groups are central components of any group counseling curriculum. Nevertheless, beginning counseling students sometimes have difficulty comprehending integral concepts like member roles, therapeutic factors, and developmental stages when presented in abstract form. This article makes core group counseling concepts as articulated by textbook authors (e.g., Chen & Rybak, 2003; Corey, 2004; Corey & Corey, 2002; Gladding (2003); Greenberg (2003); Jacobs, Masson, & Harvill, 1998; Johnson & Johnson (2006); Kline, 2003; Yalom, 2005) more concrete and viewable through the lens of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Principles of group interaction are not exclusive to counseling groups but can be observed in any group of individuals spending time together. In fact, Delucia-Waack (2002) wrote:

> Related to the excitement and power of group work is the notion that group work is everywhere. Group work means all kinds of groups from book clubs to chess clubs to committees and that we are all a part of many groups. And thus, everyone has information and knowledge about the power of groups, group dynamics, and group stages. Movies such as *The Breakfast Club, The Big Chill, 12 Angry Men,* and *The Dream Team* are good examples of group stages and dynamics in non-therapeutic groups. This is...
empowering for new group leaders, and it extends the notion of group work. (pp. 107-108, emphasis added)

Yalom (2005), as well, stated that his principles “are not limited to group therapy” (p. 202). In fact, Yalom uses *The Wizard of Oz* to illustrate one of members' biggest typical fears, that “the ‘big people’ were all Dorotheys facing the Oz wizard” (p. 212) and that “the nakedness of (is) a terrifying sight, one that we conceal from ourselves with the heaviest of curtains. The ‘big people’ are one of our most effective curtains” (p. 213).

The use of stories, metaphor, and other figurative pedagogical techniques by helpers dates back at least to Plato (Wickman, Daniels, Fesmire, & White, 1999). In the *Bible*, parables were common teaching tools that helped people grasp abstract concepts. This makes sense, as one of the foundations of educational psychology is that people learn best when new information is presented in terms of existing knowledge (Snowman, 2002). As this relates to counseling and teaching, Milton Erickson, for example, would tell analogous stories or jokes that were structurally similar to client situations, but made no direct mention of the clients nor their situations (Wickman et al., 1999). Erickson recommended the use of characters other than clients, or even animals, in his stories to more clearly highlight the structure of a situation as opposed to its content.

In counselor education, the use of movie and video clips to illustrate aspects of counseling also has become increasingly common (Armstrong & Berg, 2005; Delucia-Waack, 2002; Koch & Dollarhide, 2000). Connecting theoretical concepts from counseling textbooks to frames of reference likely familiar to readers, such as Armstrong and Berg’s (2005) analysis of group dynamics within *12 Angry Men*, makes the concepts come alive and become more real.

In that light, *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum, 1900; Baum, Tietjens, & Sloane, 1903; LeRoy & Fleming, 1939) reveals much about the power of groups. First, it provides prototypical examples of naturally occurring group member roles. Additionally, it offers many examples of therapeutic factors related to group process. Also, it vividly illustrates stages of group development from beginning to end. Lastly, the story teaches how, by working together, members can reach both mutual and individual goals that may otherwise be outside of their grasp.

The Oz Group Roles

For the sake of this article, principle characters are collectively referred to as the “Oz group” and are divided into *member* and *facilitator* roles.
Members of the Oz group are distinguished by the following criteria: (a) having a perceived deficiency sought to be overcome, (b) being physically present with each other for most of the story, (c) working together to reach various group goals, and (d) getting individual needs met through their shared group experience. Criteria for Oz group facilitators include either (a) guiding and directing mutual group goals or (b) performing actions facilitating group development and, consequently, group member change.

Member Roles

Gladding (2003) identified various prototypical member roles, categorizing them according to group building/facilitative, maintenance, and blocking functions. These roles may correspondingly add functioning, contribute to bonding, or divert the group's experiences away from intimate interaction.

The Oz group consisted of five members: Dorothy Gale, a 12-year-old girl from Kansas; her little dog Toto, who sometimes also acted as a facilitator; the Scarecrow; Tin Man; and Cowardly Lion. Similar to a "real life group," members took on various and sometimes interchangeable roles throughout the journey.

Dorothy. Dorothy can be seen as an encourager/energizer and information giver as she encounters other group members on her way to Oz, cheering them on that they can succeed at achieving their goals and providing information on how to get that done.

Scarecrow. The Scarecrow acts as a playperson during the journey on the Yellow Brick Road, playfully jumping, dancing, and singing while contemplating how wonderful life would be "if I only had a brain!" Alternatively, the Scarecrow acts as a harmonizer by relieving tension during a scuffle with a talking tree and an advice giver when he admonishes the Tin Man not to cry. The Scarecrow is also an initiator/contributor when he comes up with a plan for how to rescue Dorothy from the castle of the Wicked Witch.

Tin Man. The Tin Man seems to be a helpseeker during times when he becomes rusty and is unable to function without assistance from other group members. He also tends to be a follower in that he does not seem to come up with any ideas on his own for the advancement of the group or himself, but rather seems to go where the group's direction takes him.

Cowardly Lion. When the group first meets the Lion, he acts as an aggressor, growling and trying to intimidate the others. This facade is short lived, though, as the Lion soon becomes a self-confessor, revealing his cowardly nature.
Facilitator Roles

Four characters act in facilitative roles for the Oz group's development: Glinda the Good Witch, the Wizard, the Wicked Witch, and Toto.

**Glinda.** Glinda consistently functions as a guide helping orient Dorothy and her colleagues on their journey. Whereas Glinda simply might have told Dorothy instructions for returning to Kansas (i.e., clicking ruby slippers together and repetitively reciting “there's no place like home”), doing so would have perpetuated the myth that facilitators can wave a wand and fix problems. Instead, acting as a nondirective “Rogrian witch,” Glinda conveyed **authenticity** and was so transparent that she traveled in a translucent bubble. Her “non-expert” facilitative style also was demonstrated by a purposeful intent to refrain from solving member problems or acting as a magic healer, in addition to being symbolized by her bumbling personal demeanor. The following dialogue exemplifies Glinda's nondirective approach.

**Glinda:** You don't need to be helped any longer. You’ve always had the power to go back to Kansas.

**Dorothy:** I have?

**Scarecrow:** Then why didn’t you tell her before?

**Glinda:** Because she wouldn’t have believed me. She had to learn it for herself.

**The Wizard.** The Wizard, similar to beginning counselors in training, seemed to be experiencing the **impostor syndrome** (Clance & Imes, 1978) for much of the story, using his position of authority to compensate for secret feelings of inadequacy as a leader and a fear of being exposed as a fraud. As a result, the Wizard focused his energies not on group member needs, but his own desires to perpetuate the **mystification** of his powers and the change process. Unlike Glinda, who was authentic and transparent, the Wizard hid behind a puffy cloud of red smoke. Yalom (2005) wrote that leaders must become “defrocked” and “the therapeutic process demystified” (p. 216) for groups to “progress to a more satisfying experience only after the awesome leader has been removed” (p. 315, emphasis added). In this case, only after the Wizard has been exposed as an “ordinary man” and acknowledges being a “very bad wizard” are members able to recognize that they have achieved their purpose for being in the group. At this point in the story, the Wizard provides each character a symbolic token confirming that they already have within themselves that which they have been seeking all along.

**The Wicked Witch.** The Wicked Witch seems to play an “anti-facilitator” role throughout. Although her actions, directions to the group, and facilitation style were intended to impede group development, her
malicious attacks instead resulted in cohesion as members worked together to overcome her challenges.

_Toto - A special case._ Toto seems to follow a more constructionist participant/manager model of facilitation, acting in both member and facilitator roles simultaneously. One of two founding members, Toto was physically present with the Oz group as much as anyone else but also was a catalyst for group movement at several key junctures. Granted, a little dog that can’t speak would seem an unlikely facilitator. However, Toto was similar to the other three facilitators and unlike other group members in several ways. For example, Toto’s actions guided and led to changes and growth of the group (e.g., leaping out of the bicycle basket, running across the Witch’s drawbridge enabling the other members to rescue Dorothy, tugging at the Wizard’s curtain to expose the Wizard, and jumping out of the balloon ride home, thus providing an opportunity for group closure), but Toto did not seem to experience any personal growth himself from the process. He also did not overcome any perceived deficiency; achieve any goal through the work of the group, nor receive a “gift” from the Wizard. Toto merely remained with Dorothy and stayed alive. For these reasons, Toto is thought to have been both an Oz group member and facilitator.

**Therapeutic Factors**

According to Yalom (2005), change with a group setting comes about as a result of “the intricate interplay” of eleven “crucial aspects” called “therapeutic factors” (p. 1) that occur naturally in group process. Therapeutic factors both come about as a result of group development and simultaneously bring about further development of the group. This section examines how some of those factors manifested in the Oz group.

**Instillation of Hope**

Instillation of hope refers to members’ perception that they will “get” something from the experience that is worth the effort it takes to participate (i.e., being inspired that things can get better). For example, Glinda first offered Dorothy hope that she could get home by finding the Wizard. Instillation of hope soon became so powerful that Oz group members themselves continued to instill hope as the group coalesced. For example, Dorothy, in turn, inspired both the Scarecrow and Tin Man to believe that if they joined her in seeking the Wizard, they would obtain a brain and heart respectively. The latter two then assured the Cowardly Lion that becoming part of their group would mean receiving the courage he sought.
Universality

Shortly after forming the group, members united through a shared hope for something felt to be lacking, lamenting "If I only had a brain . . . a heart . . . the nerve" (Arlen, & Harburg, 1939a). In this way, Oz group members experienced universality, described by Yalom (2005) as feeling "I'm not alone in this" and a sense that "we're all in the same boat" (p. 6). Through the therapeutic factors of instillation of hope and universality, members believed they could resolve their unique though similar dilemmas and overcome perceived deficiencies by working together as a group.

Altruism

Altruism, defined as receiving through giving, becomes apparent when Dorothy has been captured and other group members demonstrate willingness to make mortal sacrifices on her behalf. For example, when the Witch threatens to stuff a mattress with the Scarecrow's straw, he proclaims, "I'll see you get safely to the Wizard now, whether I get a brain or not," followed by a similarly altruistic statement from the Tinman: "I'll see you reach the Wizard, whether I get a heart or not." (LeRoy & Fleming, 1939). In this way, the Scarecrow and Tinman are willing to forego their own pursued goals in exchange for Dorothy's safety and return. Similarly, the Lion, after being informed of the Scarecrow's plan for the Lion to sneak inside the heavily guarded castle, states "All right! Wicked Witch or no Wicked Witch, I'm going in for Dorothy!," thus putting aside his own personal safety in favor of rescuing Dorothy. Even Dorothy sacrifices her opportunity to return home to Kansas in the Wizard's balloon in order to go after Toto after he has jumped out.

Corrective Recapitulation of the Primary Family Group/Social Microcosm

The therapeutic factors of corrective recapitulation of the primary family group and social microcosm are uniquely displayed in the film version of Oz. Yalom wrote, "For many patients, working out problems with therapists and other members is also working through unfinished business from long ago" (p. 15). For Dorothy in particular, the Oz group was a social microcosm of the group of people with whom she interacted on the family farm in Kansas. That is, "Hunk" became the Scarecrow, "Zeke" became the "Tin Man," "Elvira Gulch" became the Wicked Witch, and "Professor Marvell" became the Wizard. Whether in Oz or Kansas, Dorothy interacted with the other members in the same way. However, it was through her experience with the Oz set of characters that was able to resolve her issues.
with their counterparts in Kansas and her feelings of frustration at being stuck on the family farm.

Other Therapeutic Factors

Other therapeutic factors took place as well, such as imparting information (e.g., how to get to the Wizard), development of socializing techniques (e.g., inappropriateness of bullying behavior), imitative behavior (e.g., following the Yellow Brick Road), interpersonal learning (e.g., Scarecrow creating a plan to rescue Dorothy), group cohesiveness (e.g., group coming together in developing goals and accomplishing tasks), catharsis (e.g., after defeating the Witch and returning to Oz, members were rewarded with symbolic tokens of that which they sought - brain, heart, courage, way home), and existential factors (e.g., not being in "Kansas" anymore, facing death, having to find own solution home). Moreover, the constant interplay of therapeutic factors typically results in growth and development, individually and collectively, and this group was no exception.

Stages of Group Development

In The Wizard of Oz, the group moved through each stage of development, including forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). As the Oz group moved from one stage to the next, members displayed characteristics typifying each stage of development. By rising to challenges, members ultimately experienced individual as well as group growth and development. Specific group dynamics observed in each stage are discussed below.

Forming

Forming (Tuckman, 1965), also referred to as the Initial (Corey & Corey, 2002; Yalom, 2005) stage, represents common interactional behaviors of groups whose members are first meeting. These characteristics typically include (a) task-orientation; (b) uncertainty, anxiety, and fear; (c) norm setting; (d) establishment of common purpose or goal; (e) "buy in" or commitment to the therapeutic alliance; (f) idealization of the group and its "expert" leader as a panacea; (g) overly polite interaction; and (h) resistance. In Oz, the forming stage of group development began when Dorothy and Toto met Glinda, who facilitated group formation and an initial goal: Dorothy and Toto's return to Kansas. Glinda set two norms: (a) follow the yellow brick road and (b) do not remove the magical slippers. Once en route on their journey, Dorothy and Toto screened and added group members. The implied criterion for group inclusion was a perceived deficiency that could be restored by the Wizard.
Members in a group’s forming stage frequently believe solutions to their problems to be externally based (Corey, 2004; Corey & Corey, 2002; Gladding, 2003; Kline, 2003; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1979; Yalom, 2005). By traveling to Emerald City, members could find the Wizard, who would give them what they lacked (i.e., a brain, heart, or nerve, and a way home to Kansas). Members committed themselves to their mission and personal goals, entering a “honeymoon” (i.e., pseudo-intimacy) phase. Dorothy even stated, “Oh, you’re the best friends anybody ever had . . . I feel as if I’ve known you all the time!” The forming stage is perfectly visually displayed as the group blissfully skips arm-in-arm, following the yellow brick road and joyously proclaiming “we’re off to see the Wizard, the wonderful Wizard of Oz!” (Arlen & Harburg, 1939b).

Storming
Tuckman (1965) characterized the storming stage as a time in the group’s existence when reality conflicts with idealized perceptions, causing dissonance, resentment, and frustration. Whereas previously members had been seeing the group as the answer to all their problems while putting other members, the leaders, and the group itself on a pedestal, the angelic halo slips, and the proverbial “honeymoon is over.” As interaction and information about other group members increases, idealization of the group and its other members is no longer possible. Consequently, members stop pretending everything is perfect and begin expressing how they really feel. The safest targets for a group’s tension and disappointment are its leaders, who seem to have failed in their perceived problem-fixing, tension-avoiding, honeymoon-perpetuating leadership roles.

The storming stage can be scary for group members. As this phenomena played out in Oz, the Wizard did not have all the answers to the group’s problems and instead took the form of a ball of fire. In this case, the cowardly lion fainted. Dorothy then directed her ire at the group’s leader, the Wizard. Rather than the Wizard fixing members’ deficiencies, he instead provided the group with a new challenge to complete together: Obtain the Witch’s broom.

Norming
Tuckman (1965) characterized the norming stage, also referred to as the development of coheson stage by Yalom (2005), as a time in which the group is “normalizing” or “gelling,” transitioning into becoming more cohesive and supportive, with increased willingness to take risks and make sacrifices on behalf of the group or other members. Norming is also indicated by increased member-to-member (as opposed to member-to-leader)
interaction and represents the period between storming (i.e., conflict) and performing (i.e., having "gelled" together as a cohesive working group). Additionally, the norming stage represents the time period where formal and informal norms have begun to crystallize.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the norming stage is represented by the period between the initial fiery encounter with the Wizard, who provides a seemingly unobtainable task of capturing the Witch's broom, and the Oz group's accomplishing of that task. In between, the group becomes cohesive in figuring out and acting upon how to do that. After Dorothy has been taken prisoner in the witch's castle, Toto escapes by jumping off the closing drawbridge and brings the other group members back to her location. The Scarecrow comes up with a plan that requires the Lion to display courage and results in the Tin Man shedding a few tears. In doing so, this scenario displays group members coming together to accomplish goals for the group and make sacrifices on behalf of other members. By doing so and working as a team, members also have achieved their personal goals -- overcoming personal deficiencies of lacking a brain, courage, and heart, respectively – from the group experience.

**Performing**

Tuckman (1965) characterized a group in a performing stage as cohesive, gelled, supportive of each other, less leader-dependent (leader is far less active during this stage and may even look more like a member), with members taking on facilitative roles, expressing genuine interaction, and challenging of other members to maintain norms.

Yalom (2005) wrote that the leader must "fall" and become transparent, "a real person in the here-and-now" (p. 214) prior to a group being able to reach a working stage. That is, for genuine interaction to take place within the group, the leader, too, would have to be seen as a real, fallible and vulnerable person. As that plays out in the Oz group, despite the Wizard's plea to "pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," Toto yanks on said curtain, and the Wizard's facade is revealed. At this point in the story, the Wizard finally is able to depart from his previous cloak of hiding behind an all knowing, authoritarian leadership style. The Wizard explains, "I'm not a bad man, I am just a bad Wizard." Ironically, when the Wizard reveals his true self and stops attempting to approach group leadership from an expert position, only then are members able to realize they have achieved their personal goals and the group able to reach a working stage. Specifically, upon the now genuine and fallible Wizard presenting the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Lion with symbolic tokens of what they thought
they had been lacking, these group members realize that they have possessed all along within themselves what they had been seeking. Dorothy, as well, although not recognizing it at this point, has had the power to return to Kansas within her all along.

Mourning/Adjourning

Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) adjourning or mourning, stage, also called the termination stage (Corey & Corey, 2004; Yalom, 2005), is characterized as being in some ways similar to the forming stage, in that members are again looking to leaders for direction while being more tentative about risk taking and disclosure. Members frequently go into denial about the group being "over" by trying to keep the group together in some form or another. Relatedly, members grieve the loss of the group, which can sometimes result in avoidance of emotional contact. For that reason, a primary leader task is to keep members from prematurely disengaging so that they experience closure by saying goodbye to the group and each other while providing and receiving feedback. The group processes what their shared experience has meant to each member and what each member will take from the group into their lives from that point forward.

In the Oz group, Glinda, who facilitated the forming stage, returns to facilitate the adjourning/mourning stage, which begins after Toto and Dorothy have left the Wizard's balloon. "Denial" begins as group members try to keep the group together while at the same time expressing sadness for its termination. The Lion says, "Stay with us, then, Dorothy. We all love ya. We don't want ya to go." The Tin Man says, "Now I know I've got a heart, because it's breaking." Regarding what Oz group meant to Dorothy and how she will use the experience outside of group, Dorothy reflects, "if I ever go looking for my heart's desire again, I won't look any further than my own backyard, because, if it isn't there, I never really lost it to begin with." The other members make affirmative statements that also acknowledge having achieved their individual goals. Dorothy says goodbye and provides feedback to other members, including telling the Scarecrow that she'll miss him "most of all." She then clicks her ruby-slippered heels together, recognizing that "there's no place like home."

Discussion

The Wizard of Oz as a story seems to have resonated deeply with several generations of viewers and continues to do so. The story's deep integration into mainstream culture might be explained by the richness of its symbolism and ability to both mirror and perhaps influence Western
perspectives on the human condition. Much of the film’s dialogue has become embedded into cultural vocabulary, providing a metaphor for understanding and experiencing life itself. We suspect the evolution the Oz story went through from Baum’s (1900) original story to a staged musical to a multi-authored screenplay that changed hands many times might explain its ability to capture such an enriched human perspective on so many different levels.

Group theorists such as Yalom (2005), Tuckman (1965), and Gladding (2003) also have discovered universal truths about the sociology of groups and provided a structure for recognizing naturally occurring components of group interaction. A fictional group whose storyline went through an elongated refinement process and was designed to entertain and relate to a large audience would seem especially compatible to theorized components of group process and development.

Conclusion

The Wizard of Oz is an iconic film familiar to almost everyone, and, for many, a story that holds deep meaning as a formative part of personal development. It has become a culturally ingrained story of characters seeking to accomplish personal and group goals. By attaching Tuckman’s stages, Yalom’s therapeutic factors, and Gladding’s member roles to an already familiar schema like The Wizard of Oz, new concepts become more quickly apparent in terms of this existing framework, especially for counselors in training with no prior experience in group work. For these reasons, we recommend using The Wizard of Oz and this analysis in particular as tools for introducing components of group counseling to beginning students in the field.

References

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Illinois Counseling Association Journal—The Oz Group


