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Twelve-Step Self-Help Groups:
The Spontaneous Emergence of
"Grace Communities"

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This article describes the moral atmosphere of Twelve-Step Self-Help groups (TSSHGs) following the cognitive-developmental schema. The author analyzes four representative principles of TSSHGs: mutuality, unconditional care and love, faith, and voluntarism. The ideology of TSSHGs, distinct from the actual moral reasoning and behavior of group members, represents the highest stage of moral development. TSSHGs function as a whole according to the sixth stage of principled justice and the seventh metaphoric stage, and represents the highest stage of the ethic of care. Several parallels between the educational just communities and TSSHGs provide an explanation of how the groups influence the moral reasoning of the participants. As the underlying principle of morality of TSSHGs goes beyond a universal just and toward an ultimate grace, they are considered "grace communities." TSSHGs that center around a behavioral disorder, for example, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or Narcotics Anonymous (NA), represent the ability of a community to carry the moral message of grace into its participants' lives and initiate a moral transformation that supports the removal of the behavioral disorder.

The influence of self-help groups (SHGs) on the individual members of the group is the subject of various studies and explanations (e.g., Gartner & Riessman, 1977; Gidron & Chesler, 1994; Kennedy & Humphreys, 1994; Robinson & Henry, 1977; Romeder, 1990). Interaction with the group is found to influence the member's worldview, behavior, emotional state, social network, and spirituality. However, the morality of TSSHGs, and the influence of said morality on the individual member, is a component of this interaction that receives limited attention.

Most descriptions of SHGs put emphasis on the group's unique social system and human interactions (e.g., Kurtz, 1990). Nevertheless, Katz and Bender (1990) found it essential to include a moral aspect in their definition of SHGs (that the groups publicize an ideology or set of values that meet beneficial and noninjurious goals and customs). These values are for the well-being of the individual member, as well society as a whole, and follow principles of social justice and morality. In addition to the above, the author proposes that the unique structure and process which distinguishes them from other groups, organizations, or social institutions is their function as agents that carry moral lessons into the lives of individual members.

In analyzing morality, Lawrence Kohlberg describes a cognitive-developmental universal sequence consisting of six defined stages of moral reasoning (Colby, Kohlberg, & Kauffman, 1987). According to Kohlberg, all individuals are subject to this developmental sequence regardless of cultural background (i.e., the development of moral reasoning for any individual will follow the same sequence regardless of her or his social or personal environment).

Kohlberg's theory aroused vast criticism rejecting his basic assumption of a universal developmental sequence and absolute ethical principle (e.g., Gilligan, 1993; Munsey, 1980), including the emphasis on cognitive and rational reasoning (e.g., Simpson, 1975). Nevertheless, for our purposes this criticism is irrelevant, because we are concerned not with the development issue but rather with a description of certain formal reasoning. Consequently, Gilligan's addition of the gender-influenced "care principle" of morality (1993) is included in this description. In this context, the following description is in accord with several claims of Kohlberg's opponents as well. The author follows Kohlberg's framework since it is well known, strongly influential, and continues a tradition traceable back to Platonic philosophy. It is also central to Kantian philosophy and to penetrated cognitive psychology since its inception by Baldwin, Dewey, and Piaget (Tappan, Kohlberg, Schrader, Higgins, Armon, & Lei, 1987).

The stages of Kohlberg's theory describe the cognitive structure of the individual's moral domain rather than its concrete content. During each stage the individual makes moral judgments according to certain principles, and each stage postulates different reasons for doing right, which can be summarized as follows (Colby, et al., 1987):

1. Stage One: To avoid punishment by authority.

2. Stage Two: To serve one's own needs or interests while recognizing that others have their own needs and interests as well.

3. Stage Three: The need to be a good person in the eyes of the individual and others, and the importance of the judgment of the group.

4. Stage Four: To keep the institution going by upholding its rules, or to meet one's own obligations of conscience.

5. Stage Five: An obligation to the social contract and personal rights of all.

6. Stage Six: The rational belief in the validity of universal moral principles, and a sense of personal commitment to them.

The sixth stage is the principal one. Here reasoning is based on a just principle applicable to all, including the individual (Kohlberg, 1971). Although Stage Six is a priory, the highest possible according to Kohlberg's formalistic theory based on the ethical rule (Munsey, 1980), Kohlberg himself moved into the definition of a higher "soft" stage. This soft stage, or Stage Seven, reasoning goes beyond rationality and combines the Stage Six Just Principle with the ultimate meaning of life. Rightness, according to the Just Principle, is defined by acts that go beyond the needed and involve the willingness for self-sacrifice and unconditional care. It is a morality based on a contemplative experience leading into a cosmological perspective of identification with the infinite (Kohlberg, 1981; Kohlberg & Ryncarz, 1990). Since this stage goes beyond moral questions of right or wrong and into religious or logical questions on the meaning of life, and since its morality is based on the same universal Just Principle as that of Stage Six, Kohlberg defines it as a metaphoric stage *only*. It is obvious that the seventh stage, which includes the morality of care, incorporates Gilligan's contribution of a morality of care that goes beyond that of justice (Gilligan, Murphy, & Tappan, 1990).

In addition to individual moral reasoning, there are collective moral reasoning and norms justification, which are distinct from the moral stage of the individual. This can dominate in a specific time and place over the individual's moral reasoning. This is termed the "moral atmosphere" of the group, organization, or institution (Kohlberg, 1975). The moral atmosphere is defined by rules that set the distribution of power and/ or authority within the group, organization, or institution. The moral atmosphere of a social environment is more than the sum of moral judgments and actions of the participating individuals. It consists of a sense of community, solidarity, and coherence (Kohlberg, Levin, & Hewer, 1983). The moral atmosphere can function as a powerful force in determining moral conduct. It is a factor found to have influence on the stage development of the moral reasoning of the individual (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Kutnick believes it also serves as a bridge between judgment and action (cited in Dror, 1995).

A group, organization, or institution is perceived by its participants as being in a certain moral stage (Kohlberg, 1975). An environment of a higher stage simulates moral growth. This process is not limited to stage understanding only but includes exposure to a moral act and an institutional arrangement. The individuals react to a

combination of moral understanding, moral acts, and institutional rules as a relatively homogenous whole related to their own moral stage. In these situations the moral act of the individual is a function of norms and the group process of decision making. Thus, it is important that the moral atmosphere of a group represents a higher stage of development than that of the average individual within the group. Using Kohlberg's (1981) own terms, we can claim that while the individual's moral reasoning constitutes the "is" (i.e., the empirical facts), the moral atmosphere of the group constitutes the "ought" (i.e., the ideal reasoning that the individual should gradually adopt).

The moral atmosphere of a group, organization, or institution may be hidden. This is the case with many professional institutions such as schools or treatment agencies, but it can be overtly produced, adopted, or challenged by the participants of the group or institution. This process of open discussion on rule making stands at the core of the educational Just Community model (Power, et al., 1989). The author will demonstrate here that the same process also stands at the core of SHGs by the very definition of the group as following the self-help ethos and its general ideology, structure, and practice. Therefore, SHGs are examples of vital Just Communities that emerged spontaneously and overtly carry the Just Principle into the group's life and discussions.

Since SHGs cover a wide range of different types of groups, this article will focus mainly on groups defined as therapeutics (Katz & Bender, 1990; i.e., groups that aim toward a personal change of its members). Within the therapeutics category the focus is mostly on Twelve-Step SHGs (TSSHGs; i.e., groups that follow the Alcoholics Anonymous [AA] model); however, this description may be applicable to other groups as well. The purpose here is:

1. To present the mechanism of these TSSHGs as a Just Community, thus broadening our understanding of the change process that is enhanced by group participation.

2. To generalize the Just Community idea into a model of a community that occurs spontaneously within the prevailing society, and to define it by a new term: Grace Community.

3. To integrate two distinct domains of study: TSSHGs and the cognitive-developmental principles of moral reasoning.

4. To broaden the theoretical findings into a question of the relationship between community construction and the prevention of behavioral disorders.

This analysis, conceptual rather than empirical, is based mainly on qualitative rather than quantitative studies on TSSHGs (e.g., Dorr, Bonner, & Ayres, 1983; Ronel, 1993; Ronel & Humphreys, 1998-9). The qualitative method is believed by several

self-help researchers to be more appropriate for self-help studies (e.g., Kennedy & Humphreys, 1994; Kurtz, 1997). However, the author's theoretical inference calls for a future empirical affirmation and may serve as a theoretical framework for such a study.

The Moral Atmosphere of TSSHGs

The moral culture, or moral atmosphere, of any group or community that stems from the group's ideology and value system is revealed in the group processes and recommended norms of behavior for its members. As TSSHGs are no exception, we can identify their moral atmosphere by analyzing their norms and values according to the cognitive-developmental principles of moral reasoning. It should be noted that we analyze the *ideology of the group* and not the moral acts or moral reasoning of the individual participants. The subject is the *ideal of the group* and not the demonstration of its accomplishment by its members.

Since moral reasoning relates to the cognitive structure rather than its content, the following analysis focuses on the *ideal principles of action* of TSSHGs rather than the actions themselves. The author analyzes four representative principles: mutuality, unconditional care and love, faith, and voluntarism.

Mutuality

At the root of TSSHGs, also called Mutual-Help Groups (e.g., Kilillea, 1976), lies a dominant characteristic distinguishing them from other therapeutic groups: the principle of mutuality. TSSHGs are groups where all members share a common problem and are in need of help for that problem. All members have mutual relationships concerning the problem that brought them into the group and its solution according to the group. Consequently, all group processes, as well as the structure of the groups themselves, are that of conscious mutuality.

Following Gilligan, we can identify this conscious mutuality as representing the highest development of ethic of care: "This ethic, which reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, evolves around a central insight, that self and other are inter-dependent" (1993, p. 74). In the language of TSSHGs, this means, "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1965, p. 129), and "Realization dawns that he is but a small part of a great whole – the group must survive or the individual will not" (p. 130). Such social reasoning that goes beyond the individual corresponds to Sonnert & Commons' (1994) understanding of the sixth stage of moral development.

This reciprocity is exemplified by norms of support and the help-giving processes that indicate its underlying morality. Any member, regardless of position within the group, is both a potential giver and receiver of help. A member who needs help knows that the support of the others is promised for as long as it is needed (Ronel, 1993). At the same time, a member should willingly provide his or her peers with needed help (unconditionally and without hope of reward (Robinson & Henry, 1977). However, according to the Helper Therapy principle (Riessman, 1965), mutuality is more complex since any help-giver is also considered a receiver of help by her or his very own actions. The same act of help giving is an act that in turn supports the givers themselves.

According to Smith, analyzing the morality of help-giving within the groups, if we adopt an economical model (cited in Bargal, Gidron, & Mishaeli, 1983), we reach a Free Market formula representing Stage Two morality. One provides help since one knows that this very act will help him/her in return. In Narcotics Anonymous (NA) it is said, "We keep what we have by giving it away" (1988). As an individual enters a TSSHG to solve a painful problem, in the initial encounter with the group this Stage Two reasoning is typical. But is this actually the meaning of the ideology of the group? Is this the wished-for moral atmosphere (to be based on Free Market reasoning)?

The economic model falls short as a description of the ideology of most TSSHGs. In contrast, Titmuss (cited in Bargal, et al., 1983) describes a social model where people willingly contribute to others, even when it costs them more than they receive. This social model is prototypical to TSSHGs. In the ideology of the TSSHGs mutual help-giving is justified as the right action, regardless of the direct benefits of this action (at least in regard to those interactions held within the groups). It is an overt norm within the groups that justifies the group's existence, as opposed to other methods of treatment, and locates those groups within a specific field of care. The help-giving decision should be applicable to all members, at all times and unconditionally (Ronel, 1993). This includes "good" members as well as "bad" ones (i.e., those who do not follow the group's suggestions). Regardless of members' accomplishments, or their social, cultural, or personal background, they are equally potential objects of help-giving activities as long as they are willing to receive help. The main commitment of the groups is to provide help and support for everyone. Although helping others is a source of inner reward, this decision is a universal one in the group's life. It falls under Kohlberg's definition of Stage Six moral decision making (1981, p. 168), which states, "a decision acceptable to any person involved in the situation who must play one of the roles affected by the decision, but does not know which role he or she will play."

So far we have seen that at the root of TSSHGs lies a function held in parallel to the Just Principle of the sixth moral stage, a function of genuine mutuality that also agrees with the ethic of care. Mutuality represents a universal principle of

interresponsibility and just help. Group members are constantly exposed to the just help and caring performance of this function (i.e., all members are exposed to a vital sixth stage reasoning and performance) and are encouraged to take part in this same performance regardless of their own moral stage of development.

Unconditional Care and Love

The norms of giving and support represent a value considered by several researchers as fundamental to most TSSHGs (the value of unconditional care and Love (Borman, 1992; Dorr, et al., 1983; Ronel, 1993). In the Medvene and Teal (in press) study on leaders of SHGs, more than half of the studied leaders of various non-TSSHGs claimed that obligation has no place in self-help groups, that is, members who received help from the group are under no obligation to give it back. Therefore, when those leaders give help it is given unconditionally with little concern about being underbenefited. They demonstrate a wish to create relationships that have voluntary, spontaneous, and genuinely caring features. These findings point toward the perceived importance of the value of unconditional care and love as a component in the group's social atmosphere, even in groups that have no definite ideology.

Members of TSSHGs are encouraged to share unconditional care, which is the manifestation of inner love in the sense of *agape.* In all of AA's basic writings (e.g., 1957, 1976), the unconditional service to others as a meaning of life is emphasized. Actually, the "pinnacle" of the Twelve-Step program, the twelfth step itself (see Table 1) connects between spiritual awakening, unconditional help giving, and the application of the group's ideology in everyday life.

This value of love sharply distinguishes between TSSHGs and bureaucratic systems or institutions. Sorokin (1959, 1967) describes expansively different manifestations of love throughout history and their therapeutic effects on individuals, groups, and social and political organizations. Love was found to have a positive and lasting effect that transcended all other values. Creative unconditional love is the source for the moral transformation of individuals and groups toward altruism and altruistic acts.

From an entirely different starting point, Kohlberg (1981) also declared the superiority of principle of love in regard to morality. Love (agape) is an ethic that assumes principles of justice and preserves their unity. However, moral reasoning based on love comes from a higher stage than the principle of justice. This is Stage Seven reasoning, which processes an ethic of supererogation and is centered on acts of love and human brotherhood. In moral development, love does not substitute principles of justice but surpasses them in terms of definition or accomplishment of acts beyond the required and according to duty or justice. These are acts that cannot

Table 1
The Twelve Steps of AA

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Note. From *Alcoholics Anonymous* (pp. 59-60), 1976, New York: AA World Service Office.

generally be demanded or required from every person. These acts of love on behalf of the receiver, or the one in need, willingly give up all claims that the doer of the acts could justly demand and provide the doer with a sense of significance and actualization of meaning.

Consequently, TSSHGs that are based on the value of love (e.g., AA, Al-Anon, NA, OA) give life to the highest principle of moral reasoning. Any member who experiences the value of unconditional love manifest in the group's processes and norms benefits from an exceptional exposure to Stage Seven morality. This is the underlying moral aspect in the group culture.

This moral aspect is exemplified by the group's ability to provide members with compassion and forgiveness for past wrongs. Members are unconditionally accepted into the group and accepted by their peers. They also receive unconditional forgiveness for their misdeeds. In TSSHGs, participants are encouraged to forgive those who have injured them. Forgiveness as a moral concept exists alongside self-sacrificing love,

benevolence, beneficence, and supererogation (Enright & Human Development Study Group, 1991). Forgiveness is considered superior to only following the Just Principle, since a community unified by forgiveness is not bound by the justice demands of order and duty alone. There exists the component of agape through which individuals are unified by mutual loving support.

Although members of the group are not expected to follow this highest moral stage in all of their sociomoral interactions, the group as a whole functions in accordance with this stage. Since the group consists of individuals, and group processes are held by accumulating individual acts, at any moment in the group life participants expect to find at least some members who will exhibit acts based on the reasoning of Stage Seven morality. The more a member participates in the group processes, the better the chance to meet this unique kind of morality, and even to produce acts of one's own that are based upon seventh stage intention: unconditional love. Therefore, in group processes, participants experience and perceive themselves as acting from a different motivation than they are used to in the course of everyday life. It is Stage Seven moral motivation (the one most highly encouraged by the group and considered as the most rightful).

Faith

The Twelve-Step program, which is central to TSSHGs, is a spiritual one. Following the program's ideology as a way of life, the member is guided into allowing faith in God to take root and grow in their lives. While in the third step (Table 1) one makes a decision to turn one's will and life over to the care of God, its application in Stage Seven is the adoption into the member's life of character virtues in place of egocentric character defects (Anonymous, 1991). These virtues are defined as spiritual principles of unselfishness, honesty, courage, and consideration. In the program's ideology, spiritual principles have priority over personality traits (AA, 1957). They guide the member away from egocentrism and move him or her toward closeness to God, which is the desired aim of the program. Helping others by following the principle of mutuality, and providing selfless care and forgiveness, are manifestations of spiritual principles that transfer the member from egocentrism into a close relationship with God. God is openly approached by these principles requiring no dogma or duties, but is instead based on personal motivation and meaning.

Within the groups' atmosphere, acting according to these spiritual principles is considered as the suggested and approved norm of behavior. All group members are exposed to such norms and to the value of spiritual perception that precedes the individual demand. It is a Stage Seven ideology that any member can take part in while participating in group activities.

Voluntarism

TSSHGs are voluntary, nonbureaucratic organizations (Katz & Bender, 1990; Room, 1993). Even in large worldwide organizations such as AA and NA, the importance of the individual member, and the voluntary decisions and actions of those members, goes beyond any requirement of the rules of the group. In those groups where spirituality has a definite moral content, any moral saying is related to the principle of voluntarism. The group as a whole demands nothing from individual members, nor can it sanction individual members. Group processes are based solely on the voluntary willingness of autonomous participants. Even the maintenance of formal group activities is based on voluntarism and personal willingness. Serving the group is a freely chosen option that is taken on behalf of the common good. The minimal rules of AA and NA, defined as the Twelve Traditions, are set to keep the voluntarism and autonomy of individual members within groups, of different groups within the organization and of the organization itself.

Members are encouraged to pragmatically practice their own autonomy and have respect for the autonomy of others as well. Autonomy and voluntarism are considered basic universal principles applicable to any member in any social situation within the group's life – principles that should also be held outside the group's activities and be carried into the everyday life of the member. Members are encouraged to maintain their own autonomy as well as that of others. Thus autonomous and voluntary responsibility is a content that represents the structure of Stage Six moral reasoning: autonomous reasoning based on the Just Principle and free from social or individual pressures, threats, or demands. When connected to the unconditional acceptance of others as autonomous decision makers, and the practicing of unconditional care for others for its own sake, they move further and reach the seventh metaphoric stage of moral reasoning. This last claim is exemplified by the story of an NA participant who abused the group but received no sanction whatsoever from his friends (not even a note) because of the ideology of mutual, caring voluntarism (Ronel & Humphreys, 1998-9). The moral power of the ideology of the group is revealed by its ability to keep its principles even when the group's norms are transgressed.

It should be noted that the perception of the autonomy of individual decisions and judgments does not release the members' connection to the group or the community of peers but redefines these connections and locates them on a more equal level. A concern for oneself does not exclude a concern for others. However, in TSSHGs the first, although seemingly paradoxical, is based on the second. Both can be integrated into a broader concern for the community in which the self and others are a part, or a concern for the Just Principle to which the self and others voluntarily adhere. The idea of responsibility for others and a sense of being bound together into a group seems to promote not only the development of individual moral reasoning but also a strong and

high-stage moral culture (Higgins, 1991). A vital moral community is not a threat to the autonomy of the individual but a context into which the self can be voluntarily developed (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). TSSHGs are intended to be such a context, which promotes the voluntary development of identity as that of an autonomous moral one by practicing care for others and social responsibility.

The last claim is also a continuation of Piaget's work. Piaget perceived the development of moral reasoning as moving toward a growing autonomy. As a moral culture, the voluntarism of TSSHGs accomplishes the highest moral autonomy. In this atmosphere, individual members can develop their morality into a greater autonomy. The interplay between the moral culture and the morality of individual participants is the subject of the next section.

TSSHGs as Just Communities

The initial idea of a Just Community was to create a school that would enhance the development of moral reasoning in the students. This idea was based on the results of Moshe Blatt's studies (cited in Higgins, 1991), which made it clear that a moral education can be best understood as a natural process of inter-peer dialog. Another lesson from this study is that students and teachers want to discuss real-life moral problems and not merely hypothetical ones.

TSSHGs demonstrate how those two conclusions operate in a spontaneous community. The main formal activity of TSSHGs is inter-peer sharing or discussions, which center around the mutual problem that brought the members together, and the suggested ideology to overcome that problem (Ronel, 1993). Since the suggested ideology has an intrinsic moral component, which defines the moral atmosphere of the group, the sharing and discussions hold moral lessons applicable to everyday life situations of the participants. For example, in NA groups the discussions are centered on the problem of substance dependency, with emphasis on the adoption of the ideology of the group into the member's everyday life. Thus members share their moral struggle concerning their addiction and related behavior, cognition, and affect.

The more one participates in a social group, the more likely she or he is to adopt the social perspective of the others in the group (Kohlberg, 1975). Exchange of points of view and attitudes is a part of "role-taking possibilities." However, it is not only the participation itself that is important in this process but the mutuality in role taking. TSSHGs have developed this mutuality to its extreme. It is the solid ground out of which these groups grow, and it is one of their distinct features (participation in the peer mutual role taking (Gartner & Reissman, 1977). By these peer mutual role takings, individuals have the possibility of participating in moral reasoning based on higher

principles than their own. As was proved by Just Community experiments, this possibility leads to the assimilation of a sustained higher moral reasoning by individuals.

The inner core of the moral atmosphere of an institution or environment is its "justice structure" (i.e., the way the social institution disseminates basic rights and duties and determines the division of gains of the social common). In TSSHGs the justice structure is based on spiritual faith, mutual acceptance and forgiveness, unconditional care, and love. These should be the only principles for the distribution of gains and role taking among members. In fact, those principles are considered the true gain for their own sake and thus preclude Stage Two opportunistic reasoning from becoming an end.

Consequently, just education necessitates making the schools themselves more just and encourages the students to actively participate in the process of making just schools (Power, et al., 1989). To achieve this, the curriculum, which sets the division of power and authority within the institution, must be overtly produced, challenged, and adopted. This is a democratic process of self-government where everyone has an equal vote for rule making and participates in that process. The validity of the rules is measured by their fairness to the interest of everyone involved. However, direct democracy means more than an equal vote. It is a process of moral communication that integrates the evaluation of the needs and interests of the individuals (i.e., listening, attempting to understand others, and balancing between conflicting points of view in a common and fair way). It is assumed that a developing individual becomes a moral agent when he or she learns how to take the "general-other" point of view, respect the other's rules, and be emotionally connected to the achievement of their goals.

The above process is also typical to that of TSSHGs. These groups demonstrate the possibility of direct democracy with a minimal amount of structure needed to operate (Bales, 1944; Robinson & Henry, 1977). In the very definition of the groups as being "self-help" lies their self-government and the equality of the vote. The group's processes are that of "face-to-face" interactions with direct participation, where members agree on and participate in certain activities (Gartner & Riesmann, 1977). These activities are for the benefit of everyone involved and for the group as a whole. Since the activities are held in an open and accepting atmosphere, it enables moral communication, mutual understanding, and mutual identification.

Identification with the group's ideal leads to taking the general-other point of view, which equally respects members and potential members. As was shown, the general-other point of view, which stems out of concern for others, leads the individual into willingness and acts of genuine helping and care. The moral authority of the group is the power of the collective to provide a support system for members to behave by a

higher stage or even the highest stage of reasoning. The general-other point of view, which is learned by group processes, provides an external moral motivation to those who lack an internal one. Although such an influence is limited to the situational context of the group only (Kohlberg, Levine, & Hewer, 1983), in TSSHGs, where the situational context is extensive and continues into the life of the members by the development of an informal social network, the influence is stronger. It enables the internalization of the group's moral motivation and subsequent reasoning.

Another condition that was found in the Just Community experiments that influenced individual moral reasoning and behavior is the development of group solidarity (Higgins, 1991). The more cohesive the group, the better it can serve as an external agent of moral motivation. TSSHGs can serve as models of charismatic groups that are highly cohesive (Galanter, 1990). The groups have strongly held belief systems with internal morality and a proven ability to influence the behavior of the participants according to this belief system. The social mechanism creates an effective commitment of the members to the group and also a moral commitment to the group's ideology (Ronel, 1993). Members who have gone through a conversion-like experience of internalizing the group's message with its moral component become enthusiastic agents of the message of change (Davis & Anderson, 1983). At the end of the process motivation is not external or social but based upon an internal reinforcement. The development of moral reasoning is part of this internal motivation.

In the interplay between moral reasoning and action, Kohlberg distinguished between deontic judgment of "what is right to do" and responsibility judgment of "what I ought to do" (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984). Stages of deontic judgment are necessary but not sufficient for parallel stages of responsibility judgment. Involvement in pragmatic TSSHGs, which preach to action and experience rather than theoretical or scientific understanding of the problem (Rehm, 1993), leads into the development of responsibility judgment. This is the judgment of the individual of "what I ought to do," which is based on the deontic judgment of "what is right for any member in the group to do." TSSHGs provide the members with an ideology and worldview (Kennedy & Humphreys, 1994) which defines the deontic judgment. However, TSSHGs go further and support the members in the pragmatic process of translating the general and somehow theoretical "right" of the group into the individual and committed "ought." Furthermore, the pragmatism of TSSHGs involves situations where there are only responsibility judgments, without preceding deontic judgment. For a newcomer, whose deontic judgment has not yet followed the group's worldview, the pragmatic responsibility judgment is the actual adoption of the group's suggestions without understanding or internalizing them.

Various group mechanisms are set into action in this process such as framing ideology into slogans, identification between members, sharing of life-stories, and

mutual guidance (sponsoring). For example, in NA groups veteran members usually serve as living examples and guides (sponsors) in the process of translating ideology into action (Ronel, 1998). The sharing of their own personal stories, filled with easy-to-remember pragmatic sayings, demonstrates the transition between the suffering of the pregroup period, the gradual adapting of their life into the group's ideology, and the theoretical acceptance of this ideology (Ronel & Humphreys, 1998-9). A key concept in the process is the gradual growth of personal responsibility for one's own recovery. In TSSHGs the members themselves are considered the sole owners of the problem (i.e., only the member has the ability to define himself or herself as suffering from the problem and to make a decision about the needed steps for its solution). Responsibility for recovery is understood to be an active adoption of the group ideology into one's life. It is the gradual active transition between deontic judgment and responsibility judgment. For newcomers to the group who begin with a situation of powerlessness over their problem, the admission of powerlessness enables them to move from an all-or-nothing position to that of responsibility (Fowler, 1993). The identification experienced by newcomers with the sharing veterans should lead them into this very concept and action of responsibility taking. On the other hand, veteran members who identify with the suffering of newcomers who serve as reminders of their own past suffering are encouraged to take greater responsibility so as to experience a more substantial progress.

From a Just Community to a Grace Community

Gidron & Chesler (1994) perceive SHGs in general as a novel form of modern day nongeographic communities. TSSHGs form a community of peers faced with a common problem and joined together to provide a common solution or mutual support. As community is a universal social framework, viewing TSSHGs within this framework enables us to project from community research into TSSHGs and vice versa.

Cordella (1991) distinguished between two types of communities: (a) the social contract model, which assumes a human nature of self-interest; and (b) the mutual model, which is guided more by altruism. TSSHGs are a modern form of mutual community, which operates under the motivation of mutuality and selfless care. These are communities of reconciliation and restoration that continue a tradition rooted in religious groups such as the Qumran community (Glaser, 1981; Hurvitz, 1976). In mutualist communities morality is perceived as being based on freedom (Cordella, 1991). Without personal freedom genuine morality is impossible. Limitations of personal freedom are limitations to the ability to reason according to the Just Principle and the heterocentric motivation of unconditioned love. A genuine morality is achieved through freely chosen service to others, as the help-giving is conducted in TSSHGs. Such a freedom enables us to commune with others on the basis of their own interests.

Kohlberg (1980) described the transformation of his goals in creating the Just Community approach. While his first intention was for a public education toward the Stage Six reasoning of Platonic Idealism, after he completed his longitudinal studies on the development of moral judgment he lowered his expectation – first to the fifth stage of rational liberalism and finally to that of Stage Four reasoning (the commitment to become a good member of the community, a good citizen). It is a compromise between the ideal and the "real" based on empirical facts – between the Socratic perception of the truth as the supreme authority and the Durkheimian respect for the authority of society (Power, 1991). Thus the Just Community is a Durkheimian social mechanism for a public education toward Stage Four, which operates Socratic moral discussions.

However, TSSHGs that declare a spiritual intention go a step farther. TSSHGs are mutual communities with a moral atmosphere that represents Stage Six morality with the existential meaning of the seventh metaphoric stage, including the ethics of care. TSSHGs operate as Just Communities that influence the acts and moral reasoning of the participants with an intention that goes beyond social contract, or even a universal just as an end. The ultimate end of TSSHGs, as with other mutual communities, is to create a community based on faith, genuine love, and mutual care. In such a community, although the Just Principle has been kept, its centrality subsides in favor of *grace* as the root principle. Hence, TSSHGs model a different type of community, which we call a Grace Community.

A Grace Community is a mutual community that operates as a whole according to the principles of reciprocity of justice, voluntarism, forgiveness, and altruistic love. In that sense, according to Baldwin, the community as a unit represents an "ideal self" (cited in Tappan, et al., 1987), which models the grace principle and symbolizes the wish for ethical motivation and values that are objective and universal. As an ideal moral self, the group is able to support the members' judgments and actions outside group's context as well. The more one internalizes the Grace principles as one's ideal moral self, the more one is able to carry these principles into everyday life.

The Just Community idea stresses the coherence and strength of the group and group processes, and for that reason points toward Stage Four morality. The Grace Community idea is a return of the emphasis to the individual who is a "graduate" of the group processes and social morality. The individual who is both autonomous and caring is the end of the process and its ideal achievement. The morality is neither the egocentric morality of the first and second stages nor a social-centered morality. It is a morality of the principle sixth stage and the metaphoric seventh stage of love. Experimenting with this ideal provides community members with a means to achieve an end, even though there may be no one in the particular community who has reached this end. Nevertheless, any individual participant may grow toward that goal and be assisted by the community in this process of personal and moral transformation. Any

individual may shift from fearful and prideful self-distantiation toward trusting and relying on the power of the group, its ideology, or the transcendent – a shift from the ego-focused "false self" toward a more authentic or "true self" (Fowler, 1993, p. 117).

The fact that TSSHGs begin with a point of powerlessness (Table 1, Step 1) over a problem that individual members could not solve by themselves, parallels the Grace Community with religious teachings where personal transformation begins with a sense of despair (James, 1984; Kohlberg, 1981). This initial despair leads into a cosmic view of the meaningless of finite human life as compared to the infinite. The definite solution for despair, the achievement of identification with absolute meaning, is represented by Stage Seven morality and the Grace Principle of the community. Members are encouraged to gradually adopt the point of view of infinite grace, the existence of which is represented in the group's ideology, and to identify with that principle.

TSSHGs have strong affinity for participants who were prelabeled as deviants, such as substance-dependents. Most of these members demonstrate egocentric moral reasoning (Gibbs, 1991). They are regularly removed from social opportunities to participate in communal decision making (Kohlberg, 1980), which limits their ability for moral development. TSSHGs as Grace Communities provide these members with the devoid social opportunity concurrently with the meaning and intention of grace, which contradicts egocentric reasoning. TSSHGs provide them the ability to actively participate in social processes based on the justice, love, and grace principles and to get a sense of personal and social power that stems out of these principles. For these members the Grace Community is a bridge of sociomoral recovery (Ronel, 1998). Participation in TSSHGs may gradually arouse awareness and a voluntary sense of duty to justice and love, which may counteract egocentric desires. Mill says that in this sense we can view Grace Communities as modern "schools of public spirit" (cited in Kohlberg, 1980) where members can practice nonegocentric identification with the suffering of others, consider nonpersonal matters, or be guided by the rule of grace, which differs from the member's personal preferences. Although such communities have existed mostly in a religious context (Cordella, 1991), TSSHGs show that such communities can exist in a modern nonreligious context as well.

Conclusion and Application

Applying the cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning to the field of the therapeutic, we discover that the moral atmosphere of TSSHGs is of the highest moral reasoning (i.e., the groups operate upon an ideology that represents Stage Six moral reasoning). The analysis also indicates that TSSHGs apply the same principles that were proven as enabling the moral growth of participants in Just Communities.

Thus, TSSHGs can be considered as spontaneous Just Communities. However, the moral reasoning of the ideology of many TSSHGs goes even further (up to the seventh metaphoric stage, where morality includes the ethic of care and is based on the experience and meaning of unconditional love). The underlying principle of morality of TSSHGs is not only a universal just; it is the principle of grace. Thus TSSHGs are considered Grace Communities.

TSSHGs that center on a behavioral disorder (e.g., AA or NA) represent the ability of a community to carry a moral message of grace into its participants' lives and to initiate a moral transformation that supports the removal of the behavioral disorders. In the self-help ethos this is merely a spontaneous process, occurring since the early incubation of the groups themselves. But the moral principles are universal. Therefore we can conclude that mass prevention of behavioral disorders might be enhanced by the creation of a network of Grace Communities on the same line as described here. In such a social structure the prevailing grace principle represents the "ideal self" that can model a grace reasoning of right or wrong, as well as a reasoning of love and forgiveness that goes beyond just reasoning. It is a radical social change that may create a society of grace based on genuine moral intention rather than on the self-interests of the individual, group, or organization.

It is clearly assumed here that in such a society of grace the prevention of behavioral disorders will be intrinsic, stemming from the translation of love and grace into the very life of the individual, group, or organization. This model of society represents a model of prevention for the general idea of behavioral disorders rather than specific disorders. It is a model of restoration rather than mere punishment or rehabilitation. This applied model of "peacemaking" stands distinctly in the background of the existing just and preventive methods that bring no genuine justice or prevention (Quinny, 1991). Although utopian, this vision is encouraged by the spontaneous experience of TSSHGs – the existing vital Grace Communities – and most especially by groups of recovering addicts and deviants.

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