An analysis is made of the proposition that scapegoat role emerge in small groups to unconsciously allow other members to distance themselves from the anxiety and threat aroused by the intrapsychic and interpesonal conflict displaced onto the scapegoat. The analysis concentrates on describing the scapegoating process is small groups, the underlying dynamics, and the consequences for a group. Researchable propositions derivable from the dynamics of the scapegoating process are presented.

THE DYNAMICS OF SCAPEGOATING 1N SMALL GROUPS

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The social role of scapegoats in societies seems timeless. In early tribal cultures, a magical ritual was performed in which all the sins of the tribe were symbolically transferred into a goat. The goat was then killed or driven off into the wilderness, thereby generating a sense of purification and renewal among tribal members (Taylor & Rey, *1953).* Although perhaps not as stark or as literal today, most, if not all, social systems contain various forms of scapegoat roles. At the largest collective level, political scapegoating, "witch hunting," and scapegoating of various social groups are vivid reminders of the process of assigning blame and fault for the failings associated with a turbulent social system (Bergensen, 1977).

Within organizations, departmental warfare and defensive routines provide testimony to the search for scapegoats when an actual crisis goes out of control or an incipient crisis is brewing (Argyris, 1985). Leaders in organizations are often targeted as scapegoats when ethical boundaries are violated. Additionally, scapegoating from the standpoint of social psychological studies of prejudice has tended to be viewed as a process of displaced aggression in which minority social groups are inappropriately blamed and attacked for societal problems (Toker, 1972). The attackers are unconsciously identified with the perceived qualities they attack in the scapegoated social group (Keen, 1986). Scheidlinger (l982) noted that authoritarian leaders tend to use scapegoats to direct the attention of the group from their own shortcomings as well as from the hostility of group members toward the father or mother figure.

In terms of scapegoating at the small group level of analysis, it is a common observation of family therapists that the identified patient or client in a family system is typically the family scapegoat who unconsciously colludes with other family members to suffer openly the emotional stresses and strains of the family, so that the system of social relationships can appear as if it was otherwise emotionally stable and healthy (Napier & Whitaker 1978**).** The family scapegoat is covertly assigned the scapegoat role by other family members out of their unconscious emotional needs to avoid examining and changing the family system and their own behavior. The belief by family members that the ***only*** pressing issue is the scapegoat(s) and if ***only*** he or she could be "fixed up**"** and behavior changed the family system would function more effectively, is magical thinking and illusory. In actuality, for the system to change, every member of the family system must change, not only the scapegoated member.

The intent of this article is to present a psychodynamic theory of the scapegoating process in small groups. Scapegoating, in spite of a relatively frequent acknowledgment of its presence of small groups, has been largely neglected in terms of systematic theory construction and empirical research, particularly from a general system or group-as-a-whole perspective. The

central premise in the theoretical paradigm to be presented here asserts that there are both conscious and unconscious emotional forces underlying behavior in a group. Expressed somewhat differently, members of a group can direct themselves consciously and with intentionality toward a specific task while simultaneously struggling with powerful, unconscious, and irrational emotional forces over which they have little direct control and which tend to occur unintentionally. Overt roles in small groups are cognitive and primarily intentional social expectation sets that operate in the realm of conscious behavior. Covert roles are unintentional social expectation sets that operate outside immediate awareness and that cast a particular group member into a role for handling various unconscious feelings and emotional needs pressing for conscious acknowledgment and expression. Covert roles are directed at meeting unconscious needs, fears, wishes, and anxieties of the members of a social system.

The scapegoat role tends to be covert in that it operates largely outside of awareness, making it difficult to understand how it is being used to meet various unconscious wishes, needs, and emotions of the other group members. Unconsciously targeted scapegoats in small groups tend to represent denied polarities within the attackers that are being split and projected. The member who is covertly assigned the role simply tends to be more transparent in revealing this denied polarity. He or she in essence represents the intrapsychic conflicts of group members and is unconsciously utilized to act out a shared collective issue. Other group members' repressed urges, such as aggressiveness projected onto the scapegoat, disassociates these urges from their own aggressiveness and enables vicarious satisfaction as some of the repressed urges are acted out by the scapegoat. Certain behavior manifested by the scapegoat is related to covert intrapsychic conflicts within the members in ways that facilitate projection. For example, the person with the most openly expressed conflict regarding personal feelings of adequacy becomes the target for projected feelings of inadequacy from the rest of the group (Ringwald, 1974).

The dynamics of the scapegoating process in small groups can he considered in both its intrapsychic and interpersonal aspects as a special case of collective projective identification (Gemmill & Kraus, 1988). Collective projective identification is an action that functions to modify group members' perceptions of one another while simultaneously altering not only their image of themselves but their resulting behavior as well. This identification consists of a process whereby repressed emotions and attributes in the majority of group members are externalized and projected onto a specific member—the scapegoat. This process represents a defensive routine characterized by massive denial that any member other than the scapegoat possesses the denied emotions and attributes. In a sense, the scapegoat expresses or contains the denied group emotions and attributes underlying a particular group concern and becomes the target for the projections of other group members with respect to that concern. That is, members of the group covertly "identify" with the feelings expressed by the scapegoat and, as a result, unconsciously "push" their own unwanted emotions or wishes onto the scapegoat. The scapegoat serves as a prototype of denied and repressed feelings and wishes and a container for other members' emotions. Subsequently the scapegoat not only has to deal with her or his own emotions but also with the repressed emotions of other group members.

For example, group members may openly attack and berate a member who overtly expresses dependency needs and the desire for approval by an authority figure. The scapegoated member is in a sense expressing the denied dependency of the other group members. Other members experience threat from the internal "pressing" of their own dependency feelings toward awareness. Viewing, albeit unconsciously, their own dependency feelings as pejorative, they

attempt to rid themselves of these feelings by denying splitting, and projecting them onto the scapegoat. In the process, they displace their anger at their own dependency by attacking the scapegoat. What they dislike in the scapegoat is also what they dislike in themselves (Berkowitz & Green, 1962).

It seems difficult for most members of a group to accept the social reality that the experienced emotions and behavior of each member are not only a product of each member's particular emotional valences but also the covert emotional valences of the group (Wells, 1985). These covert emotional valences operating outside of immediate awareness "fill" the person in the scapegoat role with the denied emotions and attributes of other members. When a scapegoat speaks or engages in some action, the scapegoat not only does it him- or herself but also expresses and acts out unconscious forces at work within the group (Banet & Hayden, 1977).

The prevalent belief in a small group that the behavior of the scapegoat is solely determined by *individual* factors rather than by an interactive process primarily determined by *group* factors is an illusion. It is illusory in that it functions to sustain the widespread cultural belief that the behavior of an individual within a group is autonomous and independent of *any* group forces embedded in the social system of the small group. The illusory quality of this belief is confirmed by the voluminous research on both social conformity in small groups and obedience to authority (Asch, 1956; Janis, 1972; Milgram, 1974). Members of small groups do not easily grasp or perceive the boundary between themselves or the group, so they tend to err in believing that the group-as-a-whole does not influence their behavior within the group. Quite often a member of a small group mistakenly assumes that he or she is alone in responding with a particular emotion. This assumption is largely inaccurate and simply indicates that the member is not aware of the covert emotional processes in the group by which individual behavior within the group is determined.

Group members who are covertly assigned to scapegoat roles are often willing victims who have been socialized to experience guilt at not fitting into the social system of the small group. Not surprisingly, they tend to believe that their failing is the result of their own personal attributes rather than the results of attributes of the social system itself.

One primary function of scapegoating is to preserve the existing intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships within the social system of the group by attributing dysfunctions or difficulties within the system to the personal failings and inadequacies of an individual member. The dysfunctions and destructive aspects of the social system itself go unexamined, as does the covert collusion among group members in creating and maintaining the role of "scapegoat." Because the role is covert it is undiscussable within the group, so self-sealing nonlearning about the scapegoating dynamics constantly reoccurs. As long as the scapegoat can be blamed, the social system goes unexamined and unchanged. When a group focuses attention on one member, particularly when that member is widely viewed as the "problem member," it is because that member is actively or passively expressing some unconscious aspect of the group that is usually operating at the level of the preconscious pressing into awareness.

As Jaques (1955) suggested, at an unconscious level social systems sometimes operate as a defense against members experiencing persecutory and depressive anxiety. The social system colludes to keep the scapegoat role as part of the system, because getting rid of the scapegoat stirs up the unconscious emotions being contained. If for some reason a particular scapegoat disappears, members of a group will quickly "pull" someone else into the scapegoat role. With

the expulsion of the scapegoat, the emotions projected begin to surface internally in group members, so they covertly search for a new scapegoat in order to keep a lid on the disturbing emotions that threaten to erupt into awareness.

The scapegoat in a small group also functions as an intragroup depository for the group shadow. Gemmill (1986a), extrapolating from the work of Jung on the shadow personality, defined the group shadow as the unexpressed emotional negativity occurring within and between members. Because the emotional negativity is experienced as threatening, it is hidden in the darkness of the shadow. Attributes and emotions that group members find difficult to accept in themselves and in one another appear in the group shadow. What is suggested here is that a portion of the group shadow becomes focused on the scapegoat, who functions as a projective mirror for other group members, if only they could see it. As Muktananada stated: "There is a great mirror in the Guru's eyes, in which everything is reflected" (1980, p. 34). What is true for the guru is also true for the scapegoat. There is a great mirror in the eyes of the scapegoat in which the intrapsychic conflicts of the group membership at large are interpersonally reflected.

In a sense the scapegoat functions to announce the *covert intrapsychic emotional agenda* for the group-as-a-whole. This announcement function relates to the work of Cooper and Gustafson

(1979) on unconscious planning in small groups. Based on their clinical experience with self-analytic small groups, they hypothesized that in the initial meeting of group members, members unconsciously agree upon a collective plan for their psychological growth. The covert goals and plan take into account the personal strengths and weaknesses of the consultant to the group as well as those revealed by other group members. In this context, the scapegoat role functions to announce the covert agenda and unconscious plan of the group in terms of emotional and intrapsychic conflicts. A member who is quiet is a natural screen for drawing both negative and positive projections. The group, although sometimes arguing and expressing resentment regarding a passive scapegoat, usually colludes to allow that member to remain quiet; they are silencing not just the member, but the emotions and attributes projected on him or her.

With a quiet and passive scapegoat, the other members of the group seem to lose all interpersonal curiosity into what is lurking behind the silence. Shapiro (1982), in his experience as a family therapist, reported that in families whose members display significant character disorders, there is lack of interpersonal curiosity about one another. The apparent lack of interpersonal curiosity about the passive scapegoat can be partially explained as a defense against experiencing the emotions projected onto the blank screen constituted by the scapegoat's passivity.

Most of the work on scapegoating in small groups has tended to focus on active scapegoats who evoke the overt hostility of other group members. The suggestion here is that quiet scapegoats are more obscure, but may be functioning just as powerfully in the group as active scapegoats. Indeed, it seems possible that there may be *several scapegoats***,** which reflects shifts in the ability of the group to surface different covert agendas and work them through over time.

The process by which a scapegoat expresses denied emotions of other group members can partially be explained in terms of Redl's (1942) concept of exculpation magic through the initiatory act. In small groups there is a tendency to use the initiation act of one central member as an adequate excuse for engaging in the behavior that is taboo prior to the expression by the

central figure. The scapegoat, through the initial acting out, functions to create exculpation magic. He or she does first what the other members hardly dare to contemplate consciously but unconsciously want to do. In accordance with *priority magic,* the one who did it first "caused" it and is the real culprit. This is a form of primitive thinking, when "cause" is equated with being first temporally. By thinking that the scapegoat did it first, other members of the group assign the scapegoat all the responsibility and guilt. "She started it" or "who is to blame" are everyday manifestations of such primitive thinking. The ringleader is a scapegoat in the sense that he or she is the only one who takes "responsibility" for others. The one who initiates the act takes the risk of punishment and guilt upon him or herself by means of priority magic. A scapegoat renders the group a service by merely doing it first. She or he is (to mix a metaphor) the sacrificial lamb who acts out the repressed emotions and wishes of other group members in a way that destroys their magical expectation of punishment and removes them from having to take responsibility for their own actions.

The *exculpation magic* aspect of scapegoating is consistent with attribution theory, which asserts that individuals look for "causes" of events when they are negative to a person (Leary & Forsyth, 1988). Members of a group tend to demonstrate an egocentric bias: They take personal responsibility for groups successes but reject responsibility or blame for group failures. This bias parallels results obtained in individual performance settings. Similarly, Pfeffer (1977) concluded that organizational actions are likely to be attributed to individual actions regardless of the actual causes, especially when situational factors border on the obscure. He suggested that regardless of whether or not the behavior of a leader influences performance or effectiveness, it is important because people *believe* that it does. The primitive idea of someone as a "cause" is culturally pervasive, ranging from leader to scapegoat. Although positive outcomes are attributed to leaders, negative outcomes are likely to be attributed in some form or other to a scapegoat.

One explanation for attributing especially negative outcome to a human cause, such as a scapegoat, is that it is a primitive belief most clearly triggered by a panic-driven reaction to making sense out of social uncertainty (Pedigo & Singer, 1982). The natural uncertainty and ambiguity embedded in reality is quite often experienced as terrifying, overwhelming, complex, and chaotic. In actuality there is no natural, clear structure or meaning for the dynamics that occur in small groups that exist independently of cultural paradigms. The terror of facing this wall of uncertainty with the accompanying feeling of helplessness and powerlessness can lead, as Becker (1973) speculated, to focusing emotions on one person who is imagined to be all powerful. This attribution of power allows the terror to be focused in one place instead of diffusing it throughout a seemingly diabolic and random universe. The splitting that takes place here is around a positive transference object and a negative transference object. The positive transference object tends to be the charismatic leader in a small group whose members endow him or her with magical power to control, order, and comprehend the apparent and chaotic randomness of the universe (Slater, 1966). This over-idealization of a positive authority figure results in other group members de-skilling themselves in terms of their own leadership skills (Gemmill, 1986a). The scapegoat attracts the negative transference, allowing other group members to focus their own negativity into one object who is blamed for whatever failing is experienced by the group.

Eagle and Newton (1981), in one of the few systematic empirical investigations of the scapegoating process in small groups, found a number of common characteristics surrounding scapegoating incidents in four weekend-long small groups of the Tavistock group relations type.

A common thread running through all the incidents was that they consisted of a verbal attack directed at a single individual who was only defended by herself. The verbal attacks commonly involved accusatory "you"-type statements, which took the form of interpretations of behavior attributing negativity to them: "You are manipulative, seductive, defensive" The negative attribution seemingly provided the rationale for the attack. Scapegoats were accused of many things including intellectualizing, not allowing the group to talk about feelings, not expressing their feelings, and seeking a safe task structure to avoid expressing feelings.

In the attacks, statements pertaining to the scapegoat indicated that other group members perceived the scapegoat as removing herself from the group, believed that the scapegoat was the sole member guilty of such behavior, and assumed that the scapegoat alone was the cause of the negative effect on the group. This assumption of causality describes the attribution of considerable power to the scapegoat while absolving other group members of any personal responsibility. Not surprisingly, group members were unable to perceive their role in unconsciously colluding with the scapegoat. Similarly, the scapegoat seemed a willing victim in that she never responded with anger and rarely counterattacked or interrupted. As scapegoat she tended to respond to the attacks with "I" statements that seemed to represent attempts to defend against the content of the accusations and provide justification for the attacked behavior. Scapegoats rarely express the feelings that they have a right to do what they are doing without having to provide anyone with an explanation or justification.

It is an understatement to note that more systematic theory construction and research is needed on the psychodynamics underlying the scapegoating process in small groups. Although beyond the scope of this article, a particularly important area for investigation relates to creating, identifying, and assessing effective ways of intervening in a small group to enable members to become aware of the scapegoating process and to develop a capacity to constructively learn from this process. Not surprisingly, research into normative interventions into scapegoating in small groups is virtually nonexistent. The focus of theory and research has been on describing the scapegoating process itself, which is obviously a necessary condition for understanding the psychodynamics. In the interest of furthering empirical investigation that is grounded in theory, the following theoretical propositions are offered. They can be converted into researchable hypotheses:

Proposition 1:

When members of a small group begin to attack and blame one particular member for impeding the group in some way, that member has been covertly assigned the role of scapegoat to actively or passively contain the collective unconscious intrapsychic conflict that is pressing toward awareness among the members-at-large. The members-at-large distance themselves from unacceptable emotions, impulses, wishes, and attributes through projecting them onto a scapegoat, thereby allowing them to avoid taking responsibility for the denied emotions, impulses, wishes, and attributes in themselves.

Proposition 2:

To the extent that members of a group develop an awareness of the scapegoating process and the underlying intrapsychic and interpersonal conflict, the more accurately group members

will perceive themselves and each other, and the greater their capacity to constructively work through unconscious intrapsychic issues and conflicts within the group. In addition, group members will demonstrate a greater capacity to examine, experiment, and create a more constructive and productive social system.

Research is also needed on normative interventions in small groups directed at increasing awareness and understanding of the dynamics of scapegoating as well as the impact of the amplified awareness on group functioning. Specific interventions for enabling members to reclaim their unconscious projections onto the scapegoat is yet another area for investigations. As Kopp stated: "It is most important to run out of scapegoats" (1972, p. 224).

Running out of scapegoats, however, requires at a minimum that group members understand the dynamics of the scapegoating process, assimilate it, and integrate it into their experience.

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