The theoretical position of this paper is that the essential character of the ego-ideal, a part of superego functioning, is unconscious and functions automatically. Precursors to superego development and ego-ideal formation begin at early pre-oedipal levels, and derivations in adult behavior contain primitive aspects. Ego-ideal is perfectionistic and impossible to obey; therefore, projection of this phenomena as well as its activity leads to disappointment, anger, anxiety, depression and despair. Pseudomoral injunctions frequently rationalize and disguise early primitive aspects of unconscious superego development and ego-ideal formation. These points are illustrated and interpreted by clinical material. The therapeutic action of the group and its leader, through the complexity of transference and projection, to help modify this critical, self-defeating aspect of adult functioning is described.

The concept of the unconscious ego-ideal appears to be one of a foreigner to the field of group psychology. This is ironic when one considers the fact that Freud emphasized its importance in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” (1921). His very last line reads, “Neuroses are extraordinarily rich in content, for they embrace all possible relations between the ego and the object—both those in which the object is retained and others in which it is abandoned or erected inside the ego itself—and also the conflicting relations between the ego and the ego-ideal.” He compared the states of, “being in love, of hypnosis, of group formation, and of neuroses” (p. 142). His inferences and conclusions are that the hypnotist and the group leader, i.e., “the object,” are put in place of the ego-ideal. He sees the group as magnifying this process by adding an identification with other individuals who all originally had the same relationship with “the object” or a leader or leaders. The idealization of the leader is increased by the simultaneous projections onto the leader of the group members’ ego-ideals. Freud sug-
gests that this increases the distance between the ego and ego-ideal, and that individual ego-ideal substitutes for group ideal, which is embodied in the leader, which in turn suggests that this process can be more clearly visualized in groups—analytic as well as all others. As suggested by Freud, the leader, like the hypnotist or loved object, slips “into the place of the subject’s ego-ideal.”

Bion (1955) felt that his view of group dynamics supplemented rather than corrected Freud’s position. He too emphasized the importance of the leader and the unrealized “messianic” hopes that are placed upon the leader, which threaten individual and idea development. Bion added the contributions of Klein’s work (1937, 1945, 1952) to Freud’s groundwork. He explained that some of the complexities of adult group life that appear as massive regressions may be connected with the mechanisms described by Melanie Klein as “typical of the earliest phase of mental life” (1945). Therefore, it should not be surprising that derivatives of the early formation of an unconscious ego-ideal can be more easily visible in the analytic group.

Durkin (1964) also explored Freud’s material on group psychology, the ego-ideal and precursors of the superego and connects it with an individual’s attitude toward the analytic group. However, she draws her own conclusions, makes different analyses, and sees the processes under concern as far more complex. For one, she believes that “the individual does not just take over the leader in place of his own ego-ideal,” but that “a complicated transference is set up through which this occurs.” Moreover, she believes, “Neither the infant nor the adult neurotic seems to be as inactive as Freud implies. Both towards his Mother and toward the group the individual acts not merely submissively but ambivalently. He is passive but he is active too.” She sees modification of the individual’s own ego-ideal as including the struggle between group members and the weighted importance of the leader to bring about values more consistent with reality (pp. 83 & 84).

Briefly stated, ego-ideal is the externalization of one’s own omnipotence, and the group provides unlimited possibilities for its projection. The group milieu easily exposes this aspect of superego functioning, which as a result can be subject to therapeutic action. This, in summary, is the main focus of this paper. The terms superego and ego-ideal receive little attention in the group psychotherapy literature (Edwards, 1980, in press). The concept ego-ideal has been ignored in the field of psychoanalysis as well. Freud introduced the term in 1921 and used it again in 1932. Strachey (1934) emphasized that the “modification of the patient’s superego is brought about in a series of innumerable small steps by the agency of mutative interpretations, which are effected by the analyst in virtue of his position as object of the patient’s id-impulses and as auxiliary superego” (p. 360). He observed that after its introduction the term ego-ideal almost completely disappeared as a technical term. This point is also emphasized and elucidated by Evans (1974). Although not labeled as such, it also was described by Glatzer (1959, 1962) and Glatzer and Evans (1977). Strachey further emphasized the modification of a person’s superego as a principal alteration and goal of analysis. In the group literature, Durkin (1964) asserted that “members seem to imbue the group with the function of the superego,” and that, “this attitude must be analyzed out eventually” (p. 137).

Unconscious, pre-oedipal determinants have far more lasting results in the human psyche than has been acknowledged. This is particularly true of superego and ego-ideal formation. The analytic group can make this more visible and therefore more amenable to therapeutic efforts through its alliance with the group leader. This aspect of human development surfaces and disappears in