

Groups and Group Dynamics

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In the early part of this century there was a nascent interest in what happens in groups, mostly generated by political and social scientists such as Marx. In 1921 Freud wrote "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" which was to recognise and explore the interaction between the individual and the group process. Others too were working with groups. Kurt Lewin, later to coin the term Gestalt, was looking at group dynamics, and Jacob Moreno, certainly the first person to have used the term group therapy, was working with groups of people in what was to become known as psychodrama.

As these events were taking place in the 1930's and 1940's interest had moved from the intrapsychic dynamics of the individual to interpersonal dynamics of individuals. This was a step away from the vary individualistic nature of psychoanalysis thus far. The Second World War created a focus for events. The military hospital at Northfield was the place where "shell shocked", neurotically disordered soldiers were being treated, and was in this environment that the *Northfield experiments* took place.

Involved in these experiments were men like Bion, Foulkes, Main and many other psychoanalysts who were serving as army psychiatrists. This was the breeding ground for an understanding of groups, and out of it came the two major ways we now have of understanding groups. They initially derive from each other and subsequently, as you will see, converged to form a complementary system.

1. Bion and the Tavistock Model

Bion left the army following the war and, using what he had learnt at Northfield, began to work with experimental groups at the Tavistock Clinic in London. From this work he wrote the book called "Experiences in Groups" which was to outline his theory of group dynamics.

Bion and those who followed him at the Tavistock Clinic took the stance of observing and working with the group as a whole. Attention was rarely paid to the individual in the group, all attention was to the process of the group as a whole. This was a significant shift in thinking.

For Bion the group is a living entity which functions on two levels;

1.1 Work Groups

In this mode it is creative, fluid and able to adopt, manage and work with tasks.

1.2 Basic Assumption Groups

In this mode the group has adopted a defensive posture as a result of underlying conflict and anxiety and this defensive posture may take one of three forms. The three postures suggest that the group requires a solution to its anxiety and a solution which will save the group from its plight.

1.21 Dependency

In this posture the group is seeking a solution in which one person, usually the group leader, is seen as containing all the wisdom, knowledge and answers required by the group in order to undertake its task. The majority of the group will appear useless and helpless while one person will be seen as the only individual able to save the group.

1.22 Fight and Flight

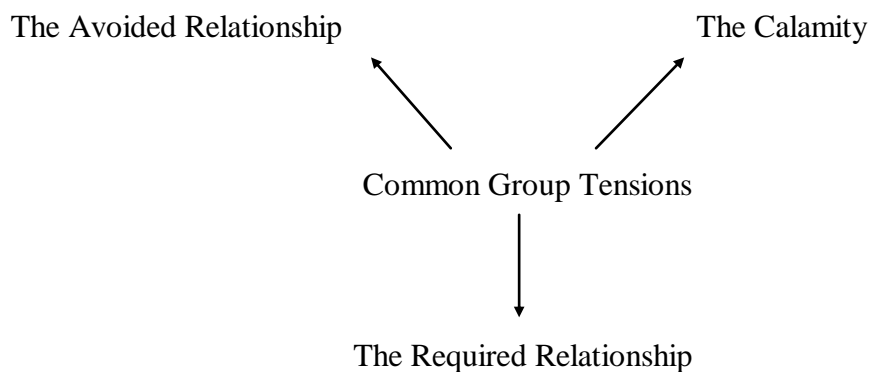
In this posture the cause of the groups anxiety becomes identified with an external object, individual or group. The group rallies, intensifies in cohesiveness and prepares to fight with, or run from, the external threat. The conversations and deliberations of the group become focused on the perceived external threat to the detriment of the group task.

1.23 Pairing

At any time in a group two people may find themselves the focus of the group's attention. Everyone else is silent, passive but expectant. The two people concerned are vital, interested and engaged in vibrant conversation. This pair are in pursuit of the solution to the group's problem; alleviating the group anxiety. In some manner it is a sexual pairing from which there will be the birth of a solution.

In these basic assumptions the group will remain stunted and uncreative, unable to pursue its task.

Ezriel, also working at the Tavistock Clinic, developed Bion's ideas. He too saw the group the group as a whole entity, given life by the interaction of individual unconscious tensions. This basic interaction he called the *Common Group Tension*. If this tension is large the group may fear that the onset of a calamity. Ezriel called this the *Avoided Relationship*. In order to avoid the feared calamity and resolve the group tension the group will develop the *Required Relationship* which maintains the status quo of the group dynamic.

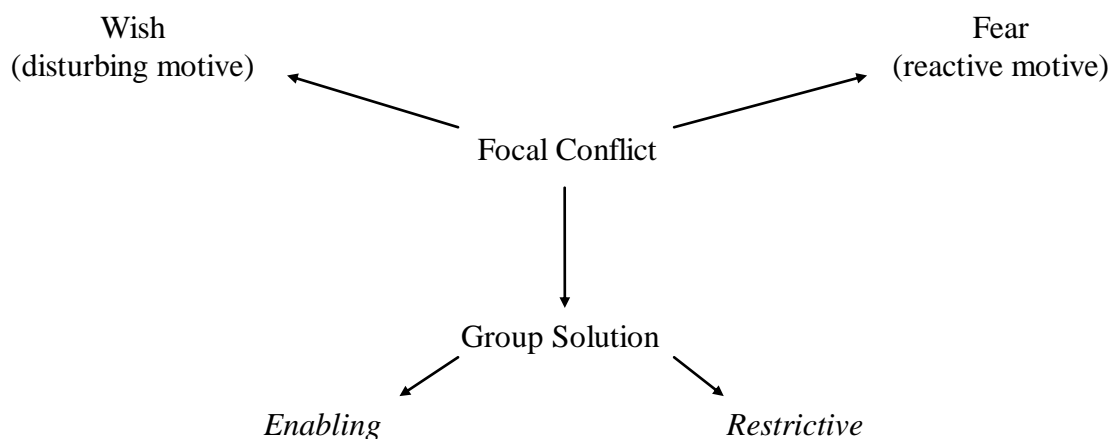


2. Foulkes and Group Analysis

Foulkes too left the army following the war, continued working with groups, founded the Group Analytic School of Psychotherapy and profoundly affected the way in which we view groups today. For Foulkes the important issues centred around the mechanisms by which the identity of the group as a whole is made up of the interactions of the individual members of whom the group is composed. At its simplest this is what Foulkes call the matrix.

It is in the matrix of a group that an individual will find repeated the pattern of relationships they have formed in earlier groups, particularly their family of origin. From the basis of an understanding of the group and the individual themselves, a comprehensive knowledge of a particular psychodynamic process is possible. Group analysis itself, and the understanding of the matrix, is built on an understanding of object relations theory, and specifically upon mechanisms such a denial and projection.

One important development in group analysis has been facilitated by Whitaker and Liebermann. They intensively studied group process and come up with what has become known as *focal conflict theory*. This is again a triadic model which suggests that in any group there will be a *wish, or disturbing motive*. As a result of this there will be a *fear or reactive motive*. The tension between the wish and the fear is the *focal conflict* and the group will attempt to defensively deny and resolve this in the *group solution*. For the group to continue, creatively, with its task the wish and the fear must be explored and resolved. This would be an *enabling solution*. A group solution which is defensive and denies the underlying conflict would be a *restrictive solution*.



3. Group Dynamic Overview

You will see from the previous sections that the work of Bion and Foulkes, although originally very different, has converged to a great extent. In many ways the group can be perceived as a whole individual entity in its own right, and in this sense it can be addressed in terms of its structure and development. In other ways we can look into the group (through the group) and see the process and interaction of the individuals that make up the group.

3.1 Group Development

It can be helpful to compare the development of a group with the development of an individual. In its earliest stages it is vulnerable, helpless and insecure. It has a great need for dependency. This is the forming stage of the group.

From now on, through the life of the group, it has two basic needs -

The need to maintain a general sense of safety at a level at which members feel safe enough to stay in the group and to take personal risks.

The need to establish and maintain norms in the group which support it as a positive medium for help.

As time passes, and safety becomes established, the group works towards the establishment of norms. In this phase of infancy the group is struggling with communication, sharing basic problems and creating some sense of cohesiveness.

After a period the group comes to adolescence. During this phase the group oscillates between dependency on authority figures (parents) on one hand, and an aggressive independence on the other hand. The moods fluctuate frequently in the process of storming or flight and fight. As the process continues negotiation will take place and a compromise will be reached which allows for more interdependence. This is the stage when problems with authority can be worked out and is the foundation from which the group can move towards a mature working through of its relationships. This is the norming phase of the group when the values have become negotiated and internalised to an extent where they are helpful to working through of the desires and wishes of the group.

Thus the group matures, grows and develops in much the same way as any of the individuals of which it is composed.

3.2 Group Structure

Just as we may view the individual in terms of a structural model, so may the group be viewed in this way. As the group comes together it has tensions within it which are a function of the desires and wishes of the individuals. These tensions are the collective id, and are often unconscious. The group will also develop a collective ego which will operate on the unconscious tensions using defence mechanisms. Should the group, through the form of the group ego, become anxious, or in threat of being overwhelmed by the unconscious tensions, it will embark upon defensive manoeuvres which will provide restrictive uncreative solutions to the tensions - just as would be true for the individual.

3.3 Group Process

This is perhaps the most important and intricate perspective of a group, well observed and understood but the hardest to describe and participate in. The group is a potential space, empty until its members come together for the first time, and yet dynamic as people already have anticipations, anxieties, fantasies and wishes. A group is already a group before its members first meet. Once together the group dynamic is served by two interrelated levels of interaction which govern the roles and relationships in the group process.

3.31 Transference

In general terms transference is a process whereby a person's displaced feelings and ideas from figures of the past on to significant others in the present. This is a process which happens in groups just as it does in individual relationships however the event and outcome is much more complex. A group of people allows any individual member of that group a number of transference relationships. Thus the individual group member may relate to three other members as say father, mother and sister. It is common for an individual to map out their family of origin in transference relationships in the group.

Others in the group will be undertaking a similar exercise until, as the group develops, a homeostasis of family roles, patterned by transference, develops. The negotiation of these family roles may be a long, arduous and conflicted task or it may be quick and painless dependent on the role fit of the individual members. The very task of negotiation is one in which personal change for the people concerned can be facilitated as they comprehend the types and norms of relationships in which they participate. It can be reliably assumed that this process in the group also takes place in other situations - that there is a repetition compulsion.

3.32 Projective Identification

Again in general terms projective identification is the manner in which parts of self are denied, split off and projected into another person. Again it is a process which happens in groups just as in individual relationships and again the outcome is much more complex, but it is specifically the basis on which roles and role relationships develop in a group. Roles such as leader, fall guy or scape goat are common and are clearly a function of projective identification.

Thus a rather weak, dependent man may well become the repository for the projections of weakness and dependency for all the other members of the group. This man takes on the role of being the expression of all

weakness in the group. Many things can happen from this point. The person himself will come to feel worthless and dysfunctional, which may well arouse the concern of the therapist. The other people in the group will tend towards being envious and hence angry with the therapist, and will also move to reject the "weak" person just as they rejected the weakness in themselves.

Another example, might be the person who takes in the projections of anger and aggression that are denied by other group members. This person may become the assertive leader of the group, which may serve a healthy function in the group, or in the extreme may become the aggressive mouthpiece for the uncontrollable rage of the group, in a quite destructive manner.

From these examples it is clear to see the powerful way in which projection identification helps to define the roles in a group and the subsequent process.

As a result of these levels of interaction, the process of the group will become defined in number of way.

The group will develop different yet very particular *atmospheres* and *moods* which will be part of a collective process, even though often initiated by the personal account of one particular individual.

The group will develop *shared themes* which will occupy the process for a period of time, reflecting something collective associations which occur in the interactions.

The group will develop its own *norms and belief system* which will serve to support the group as a positive medium for its task.

The group will develop a sense of *cohesiveness* and a sense of clarity about its *boundaries* (who is in or out of the group) which is important to the group as a safe medium in which to take risks.

For the individual in the group the levels of interaction and process in the group will hold a number of important perspectives.

It will enable the individual to find one or two persons who are especially important because of *similarities to significant others* in the person's life, producing a matrix for change.

It will allow *social comparison* to take place and so create a context to test assumptions about social isolation, self acceptance and the persons own feelings in wider human experience.

It will provide an environment in which people can *observe what others do and say* and what the consequences of these events are for the people concerned.

It will allow group members to *collide and collude* in such a way as to establish the material of relationships that allow for learning and personal change.

It will enable people to *adopt, change and adapt* the positions they occupy in the group such a way as to learn about power, centrality, their need to be liked and dominate or be dominated.

It will provide an environment for *trying out new behaviours* which have been discovered in the process of the group.

It will provide a safe environment for *receiving feedback* about the responses of others to individual behaviours.

In all of this the group process is the interaction in the *matrix of relationships* in which *transference* and *projective identification* predominantly operate.

Addendum

A parallel evolution has taken place in the field of individual psychotherapy. A focal conflict model perhaps coming from Thomas French, through the development of groups tension and conflict models of Wilfred Bion, Henry Ezriel and Dorothy Stock Whitaker, has arrived in work by Michael Balint and David Malan:

