

Group Analysis - a first choice treatment!

First of all, I would like to say how honoured I am to speak here in Vienna at the EGATIN Study Days and I thank you for inviting me.

Introduction

My theme is Group Analysis as a first choice treatment. I have chosen this title, because I wanted an opportunity to think about the importance of group analysis as a treatment of choice, a topic that is significant for experienced practitioners as well as trainees.

When conducting assessments, we hear often that people would prefer individual therapy to group therapy. I want to look at this issue, because it seems a strange declaration, given that most of our human activities occur in groups, and not surprisingly, many of the emotional problems people experience stem from disturbed relationships within these groups. There is an increasing recognition of the interpersonal factor in psychotherapy, and it is becoming increasingly clearer that the problems people have are problems in-between-people rather than in the individual alone. It is therefore even more astonishing that group therapy would be something that people try to avoid and not seek as a treatment of choice.

What are the reasons for the preference for individual treatment? How can we address the reasons behind it, when assessing for therapy? Frequently friends or colleagues, especially those individually trained, have confessed ignorance about group treatment and have asked me, when it would be appropriate to refer a client or a patient for group therapy. These are important questions. They also go against what our founding father Foulkes supposedly said, which is that every patient on a waiting list is eligible as a group patient. Is this really the case or do we need to differentiate more in this respect? What do we as practitioners, and especially as group analysts, need to be aware of when suggesting, advocating or prescribing group analysis as a treatment of choice? When and why do we recommend group therapy rather than individual therapy to a patient, and when and why is a referral for group psychotherapy feasible and appropriate?

When I trained as a group analyst, I was introduced to the idea that one way of thinking about this issue was that following individual therapy people will be less neurotic, but not necessarily more mature; while after group analysis, people end up more mature, but not necessarily less neurotic. I wonder, how this statement can be substantiated. In order to do so, I want to look at the developmental process of a human being in relation to groups, and I will draw in that respect on Winnicott. Winnicott talks explicitly about groups, as far as I know, only in two of his papers, which are:

1. Group Influences and the maladjusted Child, written in 1955, and
2. Theoretical Statement of the Field of Child Psychiatry, written in 1958.

Human beings are social beings

Human beings live, work and play in groups. When you consider for instance the movement from family to kindergarten, school and university, I could say that in fact human beings also grow up in groups. As a child, each human being has to learn at first to find a place in his or her family group, which is the setting, in which the child learns to negotiate triangular relationships. Only when there are at least three people do we speak of a group, and the original grouping of three, that is, father, mother and child, can be seen as the basis of all group phenomena.

According to Winnicott (1955), we have - roughly from age two onwards - within the child's

psyche the mother as a subjective and an objective object, the father possibly reduplicating the mother as carer, but also taking over her role as the person setting firm and strict limitations, and also, if things go well, as a man who turns out to be a human being. In this way the model of a group develops in the child's mind, depending on the child's personality structure, that is, his or her inherited tendencies, and on growth processes. Other contributing factors to the group in the child's mind are, who the mother is and how she relates to this particular child, who the father is and how he relates to this child, and then there are others, other mother-figures, and relatives, sibling, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, and finally the social context of the locality. No child is the same and no child is related to in the same way, which explains why for instance five children in the same family have five slightly different family groups in their minds, which are not identical or may not even resemble each other.

Speaking psychologically and in developmental terms, in Winnicott's view, groups do not exist before the age of two, because groups become only meaningful for the individual who has reached unit status. **Unit status** is the major achievement of earliest infancy, and is concerned with 1) the integration of the personality into one unit, 2) the indwelling of the psyche in the body, and 3) the differentiation between internal and external reality. Based on this achievement of unit status, the child can begin to sort out the relationship to one object only, and his contradictory feelings of love and hate for his mother or mother-replacement.

The child's developing capacity to negotiate triangular relationships in the family grouping, from age two onwards constitutes, as I said earlier, the basis for a complex group of inner objects formed by early experience. It is here where we find the foundation for the capacity for group membership, which lies in this stage of first maturity in childhood, when internal object relations are somewhat fixed for the first time. Winnicott compares the capacity for group membership with the infant's achievement of unit status, when he states that 'The newly integrated infant is in the first *group*.' (1955, p.193).

Fear of groups - fear of wholeness

When becoming a unit, in the 'I AM' moment of integration, this experience of wholeness is not necessarily an experience of pleasure, as we simply might assume. On the contrary, at this moment of integration, the infant experiences high anxiety, because now the external world - and I quote Winnicott:

'...comes back at the new 'I am' or 'Me' phenomenon of the self, which we perceive as a baby, and attacks it from all quarters and in all conceivable ways'. (1955, p. 149)

This experience can only be tolerated, if the mother has her arms around her baby. It is this experience of anxiety due to an expectation of 'attacks from all quarters and in all conceivable ways', which is akin to the anxiety we all know from joining a group which is new to us.

Before developing a sense of belonging to a group, every newcomer has to face this state of paranoid anxiety, full of fears and expectations of 'attacks from all quarters and in all conceivable ways'. In order to negotiate this frightening situation, I believe, every newcomer to a therapy group needs a firm connection with the group conductor. In traditional psychoanalytic terms this is called the working alliance. As group analysts, we think about this aspect as part of the overall term of dynamic administration. It seems important for group analysts to acknowledge this bond or alliance to enable people to overcome their fear of joining a group. Indeed, I believe, we need to spend more thought and energy on developing this connection with a prospective newcomer to a group.

Fear of groups - fear of family

In addition to the fear of wholeness, a fear of groups - in contrast to individual therapy - may well be based on a fearful experience of the early family group. The great number of people who express fear or hesitation in regard to joining a therapy group, may well be by implication an indication for the number of people, who had fearful experiences in their early family life. As I said earlier, we all carry around in our minds the very complex model of a group, which was formed by our early experiences in our first family group. This internal model is activated and will colour the expectations and experiences in regard to any group, we will find ourselves in later in life. This internal model of a group is what all transferences in groups are based on and part of the work of group analysis is to recognise these transferences and work them through.

Social difficulties originating in the family group are not necessarily given due consideration in individual therapy, which by definition puts emphasis on the mother-infant dyad and not necessarily on the family group or group dynamics as such. In addition, individual therapy often is confined to internal psychic dynamics and neglects external events and influences. In contrast, external social dynamics and influences are part and parcel of the working model of group analysis. Group analysis by definition takes the public, social and political environment and its impact into account. As group analysts, we consider for instance the importance of sibling dynamics, a topic which individual analysis has started to discover only relatively recently (Mitchel 2003).

Clinical example:

To give you an example, I want to tell you about a patient of mine. Ben arrived for his first interview with me, saying that he felt he needed to join a group, because all his life he had been frightened of groups. I was intrigued and impressed by this contradictory statement, also because it does not happen often that a patient arrives with the expressed wish for group therapy. Ben told me that he had had a difficult relationship with his mother, who would have preferred a daughter, and that he always had felt rejected by her. In addition, he was a younger sibling to a group of siblings at least ten years older, who as adolescents all resented to have to look after this baby brother. They let him know how they felt, by avoiding him and making him feel small and unacceptable. When his father died, Ben was 11 years old. He felt totally abandoned, left to fight for himself and usually felt that he failed. As a result of his family life, Ben experienced any new group he encountered, may it be at school, work or privately, as a threat and tried to avoid it, because he assumed he would be treated similarly again. Ben had married a woman, who put him down and made him feel inferior, by treating him in a similar way to his mother. By now, in his late 50ies, Ben was divorced. His ex-wife had demeaned him in the eyes of his sons and now, 10 years after his divorce, he had no contact with his sons whatsoever. The only person he felt close to was his younger sister.

He had noticed that at school and later also in his work life, he eventually found himself again and again in a group setting, where he felt excluded. Sooner or later this would become so intolerable that he felt forced to leave. While he had been lucky in one job, where he stayed for 15 years and from which he was now receiving a small pension on which he lived, he had been unable to tolerate the feelings of not belonging in any job since. At the latest workplace, after he thought one day that people had laughed about something he had not understood, he just walked out. The next day he did not feel able to go back, and so the next day after that, until in the end he did not return at all. He somewhat knew that the laughter had nothing to do with him, but he felt unable to face his colleagues again. He never worked since. He said, he now needed a group to look at all of this, wishing to understand himself better and also hoping that a group would help him to live with less fear for the remaining years of his life.

I very much liked this man, who was so thoughtful and had such insights, but who also came across as very sad and certainly as lonely. I invited him to join my group and he did after three sessions with me. He benefited greatly from being in the group, where he found a place of rest and a home for the first time in his life. The group became an alternative family, that is, a new family for him, where he felt wanted and accepted and where he could ask for understanding and support. In turn, his capacity for thought and insight served his group siblings well. They appreciated his experience of life and his thoughtful way of dealing with his own and with their pain and suffering. He became a valued member of the group and, almost unexpectedly for him, his relationships with his natural older siblings improved remarkably.

Group Analysis - its potency and strength

Group therapy can address similar issues as individual therapy, like relationship problems, depression or anxiety, however, the group situation is an excellent therapeutic medium for difficulties relating to social situations. In a group, the projection and transference scenario is wider and richer than in the individual setting, because there are more people available to use for that purpose. Transferences are distributed amongst many and they appear not only in relation to the therapist. The group conductor may well be a parental figure or acting as the super-ego, which arouses particular expectations, fears and wishes, but they are not the same for everybody in the group. The working through of projections and transferences, which are much more visible in the group setting, helps patients to understand better their internal object relations and current relationships. The position or view of the therapist can be questioned and relativised by others, something that can never happen in individual therapy. For instance group members may support a fellow patient's opinion and challenge the thinking of the therapist. An event like this has enormous potential.

I still remember how it felt, when my group supported me in challenging my group analyst. I was immensely surprised and it was such a relief, when I heard they also felt like I did. That they spoke up on my behalf was a new experience for me. Something like this is only possible in a group, because in contrast to individual work in a group others are present, and this brings sibling relationships and their power into view.

Now, sitting on the other side of the fence as a group analyst, I still find it striking, how much easier patients can take challenges or criticism from their fellow patients rather than from me as the conductor. Peer insights can be questioned or accepted with less difficulties that way and new ways of behaviour can be tried out amongst equals. This is, I believe, one of the reason why in group analysis the conductor needs to learn to increasingly sit back and let the group do the work. The conductor only needs to become active, when the group has got stuck in some way.

With its variety of personal backgrounds, including class, sexual orientation, ethnicity or culture, the group setting provides a rich tapestry of experience akin to that found in the wider social environment today. The encounter with diversity of this kind is especially important, if not essential, for the societies we live in, where multi-cultural groupings are becoming more and more prevalent. Our current multi-cultural groupings and societies come with a high potential for insecurity, because they share a smaller common ground due to the underlying differences and cultural variations, which generate a greater general base of anxiety and aggression (Scholz 2004). However, all these differences need to be recognised, addressed and thought about in a given society, and certainly in any therapy group. Deep and often unconscious mutual cultural deprecations will have to be acknowledged to foster mutual understanding and acceptance. The necessary process of recognition and acceptance in a group can throw light on the difficulties that are part and parcel of therapeutic work and the developmental process in general, and promotes a value system that embraces diversity and invites otherness.

Adult group membership

According to Winnicott, there are family-groups for 2 to 5 year olds, gangs for latency children, agglomerates for adolescents, and in a somewhat provoking way, he says, that groups proper exist only in adult maturity. In his view, only as mature adults have we the capacity to participate in wider group activity and to engage freely with our environment, maintaining, shaping and modifying this environment itself through group membership. Winnicott says:

The adult who is mature is able to identify with the environment, and to take part in the establishment, and to make this identification without serious sacrifice of personal impulse. (1958, p.102)

Most adults, he says, can achieve health only in a limited group, that is in their family or their immediate community, because those adults striving for the wider group may suffer ill health. The group analytic concepts of the foundation matrix, which varies from culture to culture and also contains deprecations of other cultures, as well as the international history and power relations (Scholz 2003), offers an explanation to understand this effect of joining the wider group. Every immigrant knows the experience of joining a new cultural environment, feeling a foreigner and having to adjust. It certainly took me a number of years to process and to recover the experience of loss and alienation when moving from Berlin to London. In order to feel secure, we all need to belong to groups familiar to us, which separate from, but also connect us with the wider community and society as a whole.

Adult group membership concerns our contribution to the environment in the widest sense and is strongly aligned with the notion of responsibility, a responsibility not necessarily in the sense of 'duty', but as an 'ability to respond'.

Adult maturity is also about the awareness of human destructiveness and suffering, and about the awareness of our capacity for reparation. It comprises the complex notion of 'world citizenship'.

World citizenship represents an immense and rare achievement in the development of the individual, scarcely compatible with personal health or with freedom from the depressed mood. (1958, p.102)

The Green Movement and the numerous world-wide groups dealing with political and environmental concerns today embody the idea of 'world citizenship'. 'World citizenship' has today become a much more realistic possibility than 40 years ago, when Winnicott first wrote about it. Given the new communication systems, 'world citizenship' must be, I believe, a necessary objective for living in the twenty-first century. It includes, as Winnicott says, the ability to embrace more fully the depressed mood, something which is hardly avoidable, given the various man-made and natural disasters we experience or hear about daily on the news, like wars, flooding, earthquakes and so on.

If groups are for adults only, it is no wonder that most people are frightened of them, because most people are not grown up, but stuck in the developmental process somewhere before adulthood.

Conclusion

I want to come back to the statement I made at the beginning, that following group analysis, people end up more mature, but not necessarily less neurotic. I leave it up to you to decide on my personal degree of neurosis, but I certainly felt more mature after I left my analytical therapy

group. One reason for this, I believe, is the fact that the issues of authenticity and authority are so clearly stated in group analysis. If you cannot be authentic and learn to take possession of your own personal authority in a group, the other group members will sense this and challenge you. Later, as a group analyst, your patients also will sense this and challenge you, and if you do not stand firm, they will tear you to pieces. It takes much more confidence to work with a group of eight patients, where you might for one or several sessions not know what is going on, than it takes working with one patient only. Patients in a group are not lying on the couch unable to see you, but sitting in a circle on a chair like you yourself and are constantly scrutinising you, your responses and your actions. It is not only frightening to be a patient in a group, it is also frightening to be the group's conductor.

To conclude, I want to pull together all the ideas, which I have presented to you:

- groups are the natural environment for human beings
- groups are necessary for the development of human beings
- groups are frightening
- joining a group is experienced like 'attacks from all quarters and in all conceivable ways'
- a newcomer to a group needs a bond or alliance with the conductor
- fear of groups comes from a fear of early family experience
- groups address social difficulties
- in groups projections and transferences are visible and shared out
- in groups the therapist can be questioned and challenged by others
- groups emphasize sibling relationships
- groups provide diversity and differences
- groups can make you mature
- groups mean awareness of human destructiveness and suffering
- groups come with a depressed mood - or in other terms: the depressive position
- groups are 'for adults only'
- groups force you to be authentic and develop authority

It seems to me that this is an interesting collection of points. All these points underline my basic position that groups have enormous potential, which has not only therapeutic significance, but also social, political and environmental relevance. And it is my personal view that these connotations make group analytic treatment a treatment of choice not only at the present point in time, but even more so also for the future of humanity.

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