Group Analytic Therapy and the online groups

Some principles of the group analytic approach to Online group therapy

Robi Friedman

Group analysis is "a form of psychotherapy *by* the group, *of* the group, including its conductor" (Foulkes 1975, p.3). The individual in therapy is the center of our attention, the group is the instrument through which his sufferings are cured. The dynamics of the therapeutic group have a strong impact on the individual, usually more of a progressive than regressive nature. When the group's communicational culture (the group's "matrix") is open and positive, many in the group will be responsive, reflective and will also have a reparative attitude (Schlapobersky, 2015) towards others and themselves, which will be conducive to cure. When the group's aggression is uncontained, scapegoat dynamics of hate and rejection will have a destructive impact on subgroups and the individual. Hence the importance in group analysis of forming a group culture, a "matrix", which will facilitate cure and growth through open communicative and relational means. In group analysis this culture is created by the therapist facilitation of a *shared* reciprocal relational space in which all participants actively take part. This communicational and relational characteristic of group analysis will have to translate from the usual f2f group into an online "small windows" format. The creation of such a relational space is necessary for therapy, because change needs allowing a natural re-enacting of past interpersonal patterns. These relation disorders and dysfunction connection patterns are always concerned with feelings ranging from inclusion and rejection. These are the poles of one of the most significant continuums of our social or collective unconscious. It is not surprising to see how distressing and even insulting most of the group-analytic groups' participants feel when they find out how much they are ready to do in order to be included in a relationship, a group or a community. And even more distressing is when they discover how much everyone is willing to pay in order to not be rejected. An additional painful but helpful group awareness of how great the influence of society's norms and collective preoccupations are on our conscious and unconscious mind and behavior. Group-analytic therapy elaborates the impact of society and its norms and exclusion threats on every day's life and western individualistic positions.

The group analytic therapist's challenge is to take up a unique double position in the group. "He is the responsible administrator …. Yet he leads the group only exceptionally. "Therefore, he has been called the conductor, the guardian and guide, of the group-analytic group" (Foulkes, 1975 p.3). The main reason for this special kind of "leadership who doesn't want to lead" (Anthony, 2012) is, that we find out after not too long, that the real therapist is the group. Thus, the group analyst's position is to try to provide as much space as possible for the development of the communication between all the group's members, including the conductor. Once the group starts (or a new member joins the "slow-open" therapy group, the term used for a continuous group, where newcomers join and veterans leave the group periodically), group conductors have to wean the group from their beginning natural dependence on the therapist. In the second stage conductors move to a decentralized position in the group. In the third phase of the development of an analytic group, conductors learn to trust the group and convey this position by their response to the participants in a productive and growth-conducive way. Is all this possible online?

Group analytic concepts, like the few exemplified here, are relational and usually reciprocal, rather than describing the intra-psychic realm. Resonance for example, an important therapeutic factor according to group analysis, means communicating the deepest personal responses to either emotions or persons. Because of visceral aspects of resonance, its impact online might be somewhat milder than in f2f meetings, but still will be influential. Another important therapeutic factor is "mirroring", which describes the process of learning from shared emotions and memories emerging as responses to conscious and unconscious narratives. A group participant will see his own "different" reflection in someone else's behavior. Another participant, by sharing a similar anxiety (mirroring), may be able to demonstrate different refusal or separation responses to such an anxiety, which may contribute a developmental aspect. We have found that mirroring is effectively communicated in online group therapy.

Other group-analytic specific concepts such as exchange, which is the ability to give and take in interpersonal situations, need to be transposed (de Mare, 1992) to the online format. Exchange is important as it contributes to the necessary re-enactments of dysfunctional patterns of relating, which are at the base of the therapeutic movement needed. However the transposition of exchange from the f2f setting to the virtual environment can be challenging. Excessive passion, anxiety, neediness and hate, which create destructive relations and arouse exclusion and rejection anxieties, can be better hidden in the online tiles (as many called the zoom windows). "Rejection and chronic exclusion make you sick. Inclusion cures. Rejection is trauma, inclusion is glory" (Friedman, 2018, p.5). Rejection and inclusion, these basic influences on our mental health, are sometimes less visible in online settings.

The possibility of re-enactment of dysfunctional patterns, which I have called the Relation Disorders (Friedman, 2007), e.g. the lately discussed authority Relation Disorder (Friedman and Seidler, 2022), which is a requisite of therapy, is challenged in the online space. Group therapy should allow repetitions and enactments of interpersonal patterns, while offering possibilities

to change these relational patterns. The main agents of change in group-analytic therapy are *insights* (which are intrapersonal new understandings about one self), and *"outsights"* (de Mare, 1992), which is a heightened awareness of what happens in external relations. I have found in my experience that the transposition of both insights and outsights to the online setting is possible. The next phase of the change of a dysfunctional relation pattern would be what S.H.Foulkes called *"ego-training in action"* (1968), using the learned intra- and interpersonal awareness to try new ways of coping with relational situations. In summary, online settings, in my experience, have some difficulty to fully "put on stage" dysfunctional patterns with the same easiness and naturalness than in f2f situations.

All the above tries to describe the process of "building a specific group-analytic therapeutic matrix". The "matrix" is the culture of relations and communication in the group. The reciprocal influence is total. Thus, in order to heal participants and their relations, such a matrix is created by continuously communicating the group-analytic principles of dialogue and "free floating discussion". By providing maximum space to the group's healing interaction, the therapist's progressive trust in the group is shared by all participants. The group conductor should not be seduced to be the leader or the main therapist of the group. These positions need to be learned by experience and supervision. When participants trust themselves to form healing and otherwise growth promoting relations with others including the conductor, the group-analytic matrix can be considered to be created. This culture will then continuously prevail in the group-analytic group for years. The question if such a matrix can be created in an online group is the main issue here. I think that while online relations will have less power, need more maintenance and have a tendency to fade away with time, still my experience is that significant group-analytic work can be done in weekly online therapy groups. Although trust and closeness are strongly bodily related, rooted in a primary mother/child relation, participants can still experience confidence and basic attachment online. However, my experience is that once or twice-a-year COMP f2f meetings strengthen the relations and make working online easier.

Online Group Therapy – My Personal Experience

In the past 10 years I have conducted many weekly and twice-monthly online supervision and therapeutic groups. China, Russia, Ukraine and Italy provided for diverse cultural backgrounds. I have been doing an online double session "dreamgroup" (Friedman, 2006) once a month with colleagues from Padova, complemented by yearly in-person meetings (with the exception of the pandemic period) in which we worked for a whole weekend. In addition, during the two-year-long COVID period I conducted more than 50 group analytic large groups meetings (Friedman, 2017). The question of online median and especially large groups is a special issue of great interest, which will be discussed later.

Most participants were repeatedly surprised how well the online setting worked. In spite of this overall experience, it seemed that for many participants the encounter through the screen felt uncanny, and was perceived as not welcoming and not trustworthy. For many participants a

process of almost a year started with a weird feeling, which only after several months changed into more trust and ended in a satisfactory feeling. Interestingly, for many of the participants this successful process didn't produce lasting learning with regards to the experience of the online setting. Every time an encounter ended, participants shared their surprise that they had just gone through an authentic experience of intimacy and authenticity. But after every session, this experience seemed to be forgotten. As if for these participants, there was no permanent learning that online encounters had trustworthy qualities. While I couldn't really get to the roots of the difficulty to become familiar with the meeting media, it evoked the feeling that there is a "natural" obstacle to "loving" video meetings. While these difficulties often did not exhibit the character of anxious defenses or resistances, in "block" settings, where we met for 3-4 days of 4-5 daily video meetings, the adaptation was better than in once-a-week group-analytic therapy groups. Did I miss something in the learning process?

The resistances or difficulties with video conferencing remain complex processes waiting for convincing explanation. Sometimes the discomfort with video seemed to be rooted in a *displacement* of the anger and fear aroused by COVID. For many group participants, video conferencing e unconsciously represented the pandemic and its incomprehensive reality, which was felt as insecure inclusion and even growing concerns of being 'ejected'?. Probably, ejection (e.g. due to technical glitches) from the video session reminded participants of the main characteristics of the pandemic: lonely illness and isolated death. For many, the dependency on the "online space", which didn't feel "inclusion-secure" threatened the relations because of a resistance to the "instrument". Of course, this is a central difference from the f2f meetings, where there is a conscious and unconscious "promise of non-rejection" (Friedman 2018) which feels therapeutic.

The difference between f2f and online conception of leadership

Dependency on leadership can be seen as a main defense of group participants against rejection and exclusion anxieties. In the first acute COVID phases, I detected two conflicting tendencies in online groups participants: Many tried and finally succeeded to feel included in online groups, while struggling with the difficulty to gain a sense of security. Others, participants with a stronger need for closeness, couldn't adapt to this sort of alternative meeting and at the beginning it seemed their expectation from a strong and *present* leader could not be overcome. In contrast to f2f groups, in their unconsciousness, the physical distance in the online group hindered the feeling of being protected by the therapist. This caused a series of affective difficult situations, which generally fell under the concept of the "unreal". Often the *contact* with others in the group was felt by many as *unreal* (not unauthentic). Often, group participants would say they had to "relate to others through a veil". Much effort has been invested in understanding the phenomenon which makes it more difficult for some to relate through the screens, and cannot really be approached as a relation

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dysfunction. Frequently I ask myself the opposite – how are the attachment abilities of those who adapt so well to video conferencing?

Another aspect is that although everyone can see all faces, something which cannot be done in small or large groups, one can never really look someone straight in the eye. Although I and others made an effort to feel closer by learning to "play" with an occasional fixing the window (pinning) on the video of another participant, or sharing something in the chat function, which copies something of the nonverbal communication in live meetings, nothing can really substitute the feelings of the f2f meetings. When the time came and we returned to face-to-face meetings, the significance of the absence of nonverbal "normal" communication became immediately felt. We were all surprised how much non-verbal information about taste, attraction or avoidance, of cues about anxiety, anger and our bodily messages was lost. As a result of this understanding, I repeatedly suggest to online participants to share their bodily sensations in order to improve non-verbal communication.

On the flip side, hearing others becomes much easier in online video group sessions. The larger the group the greater the improvement of hearing. Initially, group conductors of various different size groups feared that participants trying to talk simultaneously would make hearing difficult, what happened in reality is that it was easier to communicate and find one's voice. In a large video group with Ukrainian mental health professionals, in a little more than one hour, more than 40 of the 100+ participants talked. In group analytic thinking this is the first step of a process in which monologues develop into dialogues (Schlapobersky, 1993) and as described before, it is how a communicative matrix is created. Online large groups have a greater ability for verbal communication than f2f large groups.

The body in online group analysis

Small group therapy participants who usually are preoccupied by their physical appearance, may actually feel more comfortable on video. Online therapy in groups, which make the masking or hiding of the body possible, taught me a lesson about treating shame and other corporeal insecurities. It provides a possibility to "use" the setting and this increase of comfort as a transient request for containment. Participants may feel greater inclusion security and slowly work on disarming bodily defenses.

Group therapists must be careful not to reinforce the need to hide and disguise but use the online situation as a way to facilitate the work on avoidance in order to enable real contact. The wish to feel closeness and belonging to the group whatever your body looks like, together with the ability to show your body as a way of communicating is something which is facilitated by online therapy. A later transition to f2f meetings may be even more conductive to change.

Online group therapists should be sensitive to the difficulties to communicate. I believe that a group therapist should try to use the greater difficulty for some online participants to depend on the conductor, in order to further decentralize him/herself in order to encourage the

centrality of patient-to-patient communication. The seeming equality of the visual setting of the windows may for some contribute to this growth process which, as mentioned, is the essence of the group-analytic thinking on therapy.

Remembering online meetings

As noted, interestingly, *memory* of past online group meetings seemed less vivid as those of f2f meetings. This finding was corroborated time and again. The reason can be only guessed. If I use the principle we found in research, that being in a relationship with a containing person (Friedman, 2002, 2007) enhances both the memory and the sharing of dreams, we may be on the same path we outlined before. While generally, online small group therapy meetings are a surprisingly good alternative to f2f meetings, they are not as efficient in creating close relations as in f2f groups. The pressure of former f2f groups to return to meetings in person may also offer testimony to the need for closer relations and connections than online groups can offer.

I believe that psycho-educational groups or groups which do not need such deep connections and do not work on the unconscious difficulties in relating are less hampered by online communication.

The "it's not a group-analytic controversy".

In a certain group analytic institute, part of the staff refused to participate in the conduction of groups for a whole 4 days weekend, reasoning that working online is not "group-analytic". They joined after 4 months, only when it became clear that the Pandemic was robbing them of their bread and butter. It seems important to tell this, because I don't really think the opposition was really to working through video, in a time when online therapy seemed to be the optimal alternative to the prohibited f2f meetings. It could not be tested and proved, since the basic conditions for the creation of a group analytic matrix (the possibility to wean the group of its dependence, to create a communicative matrix which provides for therapy by the group's participants, including a decentralized conductor) had been met by video conferencing. I think their avoidance of video conferencing and absence is a solid sign of taking an (non-group analytic) authoritative and restrictive stand on the setting. If politics of group therapy can be discussed here, I feel there were many deeper reasons for this first refusal of group therapists. My interpretation of this dynamic is, that the unspoken power structures, traditionally dominated by group therapists, were threatened through the emergency changes created by the pandemic. From later inquiries with group conductors is seems that in addition, the insecurity and inferiority in handling video conferencing software, and envy of the adaptation abilities of the young generations may also be sources of resistance to online therapy in the first stages of the Pandemic. In Germany it was clear that young group analysts were in the frontline

of the struggle to allow online group therapy, resisting organized governmental and private rulings about this.

Forming a "group culture" on zoom

As a training group analyst in SGAZ (the Group Analytic Institute Zurich) for the last ten years I have conducted small and large groups three times each year in "blocks" of four full days. An average candidate, coming from German speaking countries, participates in this curriculum for 5-7 years. Each block includes about 16 sessions of small and large groups. As elsewhere in the world, during the years of the pandemic, we had to change the setting of some blocks to an online format. We particularly feared that the January online blocks, in which usually 3 participants join the groups replacing the 3 who have left in September, would become "leaking containers" (Weinberg, 2016). But experience refuted the anxiety and almost all new participants seemed to have succeeded in joining the groups.

It is true that in the online experience, all connections, memory, communications seemed to have some less impact than what we were used to, but looking at the end result, we felt the online blocks as being definitely good enough. Further, we found that the f2f meetings later were a substantial addition and reparation for aspects we couldn't address or understand in the online block. I think many in the group felt the f2f meetings were actually a kind of "reparation". That is why I recommended for group analytic groups who have to be mostly online, to include once or twice a year live encounters. I think many group-analytic groups' setting will in the future have some mix of f2f and online meetings, where inclusion (and rejection) are much stronger felt and contribute to the therapeutic work as already described.

The present "Sandwiches" with Ukrainians

Large and Median groups are part and parcel of the group analytic set of instruments which provide both information and are also formative and transformative (Friedman, 2008). Although not all group analysts agree that the large group has a therapeutic impact (Weinberg and Weishut, 2012), participants of this rather innovative setting regularly report having had significant insights about relating to society and especially to external and personal authority. The group-analytic large group (Friedman, 2018) enables encounters with differences, norms, political struggles, which often can only be reflected and discussed in this setting. By facilitating the meeting with up to hundreds of participants, the large group provides a unique space where "social psychotherapy" (Foulkes, 1975, p. 250) happens.

<Image 1>

Large and Median groups have also adopted the online setting, and in the lonely and isolated times of COVID became enormously popular, changing the meeting of a mass of bodies into a mass of faces. It seems only natural to share some experiences about them in this chapter. The

obvious technical advantage of an online large group of a hundred persons is its low cost and easy participation from everywhere. Worldwide people became familiar with video conference platforms, the large number of online large groups which I conducted in year and a half prior to writing this chapter are proof of it.

<Image 2>

While the feelings of participating in the online and the f2f are quite different, do both allow for a "social psychotherapy"? My response is affirmative. Participating online is never as overwhelming emotionally as in a large group in person, the physical presence of a mass is really sensed as different than meeting in windows – and still the recurring need for large groups is enormous. It seems that the need and wish to come together and to have a dialog about their collective preoccupations is the main issue. Being together with people who share concerns, in a space in which resonance and mirroring to this sharing is possible may be the explanation why, in spite of differences of the setting, for months approximately one hundred Ukrainian colleagues under war conditions were willing to make an enormous twice weekly effort and meet online during a whole evening..

The Sandwich Model (Friedman, 2016), a simple mix of small and large groups, facilitates different populations to make better use of the large groups and their contributions to growth and social health. The ease in which video conference software is able to divide the large groups into small groups is beneficial. Ukrainians under war, privileged by having internet, used the group-analytic large and small groups to   prevent primary and secondary PTSD, to exchange about their own terrible circumstances as well. Experimenting with the online use of the an innovative group-analytic instrument as the Sandwich Model showed a world premiere help in real time emergency: for the first time, civil population under fire was accompanied in extreme stress and helped to cope with the impact of traumatic situations. The online setting of the Sandwich Model made it possible to help contain the containers. The whole group shared the sound of rockets falling in Kiev and Leviv, and communicated in real time their uncontained hate and mourning processes while experiencing a lethal attack on a center of a small town.

To my surprise, it worked. The Ukrainian large group requests to continue this work is the best evidence that the online small and large groups has have a containing influence on the participants.

A technical innovation in the hybrid small group setting – as a final tip

The problem of a small group meeting f2f with some members participating online will stay with us. There are many benefits to this format allowing the flexibility of the online format while the majority of the group can enjoy the advantages of a f2f meeting.. It is the accomplishment of my Padova dreamtelling Italian group to have solved it technically. Being in

another country (Israel), I always attended online, sometimes together with another member. The solution we found was to place on a small table in the middle of the group one laptop per couple or threesome of participants. Thus, when the group of eight met, they had 4 laptops and, on each screen, they saw 5 windows, 4 of their colleagues, and one was my window, pinned and large. All but one laptop had to be muted, and the open laptop was connected to an external speaker and microphone. In countries in which I also need to work with a translator, whom is also often online, the translator can communicate with me through a messaging application such as WhatsApp or WeChat (if the translator options of the video conference software is not available). We found in our experience that this setup was very effective. Later, in Padova a newer device with 2 big screens and 2 180-degree cameras were used, where 2 half groups were seen in the windows, besides me.

We are only at the beginning of a new communicational era with enormous possibilities of therapeutic meetings which should be given space and a good investigative look.

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