

Title: Balancing My Group's and My Polarities While Trying to Become a Therapist**Abstract**

This paper delves into the therapeutic process and challenges faced while working with an elderly group analytic therapy group in a post-communist Western Balkan country, focusing on two main sources of polarization: ideological conflict and personal shame. The group was deeply divided over which political ideology—**communism or democracy**—was better, and these divisions were further complicated by a **pervasive fear of being perceived as unfaithful woman**, mirroring broader societal tensions and personal insecurities. Reflecting on my experience as a training therapist, I encountered my own polarization—surprised by the group's positive view of the communist regime, and challenged by the task of managing internal conflicts during our sessions. Interestingly, I began to adopt a motherly attitude and nurturing approach, which unexpectedly supported the therapeutic process. This paper highlights the connection between a harsh childhood in an un-holding environment and the tendency to become an **"unconsciously timid but loud adult"**, prone to conflict over simple topics. A compassionate, motherly attitude resulted the missing puzzle piece in facilitating conflict resolution, allowing group members to address their ideological disputes and feelings of shame, leading to a cohesive therapeutic experience.

My First Group: Family Dynamics

I was born in Tirana, Albania, and grew up during the Communist/Socialist regime. My childhood was beautiful and calm; I didn't feel the pressure of the 'class war' that was prevalent in communist countries, and I perceived my family as part of 'the good ones that do everything right.' My parents instilled the values of hard work and responsibility, teaching me "there is no God; only you can make it happen", and that mistakes are not allowed. Their disapproval of my mistakes often led to conflict, instilling both fear and rebelliousness in me.

The unspoken tensions in my family, particularly regarding my father's political biography impacting our lives—of which we were largely ignorant—fueled a sense of polarization. My father's constant fear of losing what they had built, weighed heavily on our family dynamics.

After the regime fell, I **discovered** the existence of relatives from my father's side which were deemed "bad influences" due to their political background. This **denial of self** and unspoken truths contributed to the complicated dynamics that echoed through our relationships, filled with unacknowledged aggression.

In this context, Dalal's description of the social unconscious (2012), encapsulates how **collective experiences and societal tensions infiltrate individual psyches**. The ideological conflicts and unresolved fears of shame within my family mirrored broader societal dynamics, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging these layers in therapeutic settings. De Mare's concept of "Koinonia" (2011) also highlights the significance of shared experiences and emotional bonds formed within the therapeutic group, illustrating how **unresolved family tensions can manifest in collective interactions**.

My Qualifying Group

The creation of my qualifying group was fraught with difficulty. For years, I had participated in various analytic groups, online and in-person, and co-conducted community groups in Tirana. However, forming my own group was a real struggle. Deep down, I carried a fear of making mistakes that stemmed from my upbringing, and it created anxiety about failing. The mantra I grew up with “you have to be the best to survive” loomed over me, making me hesitant to take the first step. I did not feel unqualified, but yet I acted overly careful, which held me back from embracing opportunities. The group I facilitated comprised eight members—beneficiaries at a community center for the elderly. The manifest of this demographic was related to my sense of providing this experience for a cluster of people that had never had the chance to express their emotions and feelings. I explain – when they were young, in Albanian culture the parents knew better; when they were matured adults, the Party and Communist system knew better; now that they are old, people are not interested in their opinion. While the latent context of my interest in this demographic, is connected deeply with a desire to engage my parents on an emotional level and soothe their life challenges. Initially structured as an open format for five months—due to prevalent mental health prejudices and COVID fears—the group dynamics presented significant challenges. Eventually, I transitioned to a closed group format, introducing richer but more complex interactions among participants.

The Polarities of My Group Members

The divergent backgrounds of my group members highlighted the complexities inherent in group dynamics. Hopper’s (1992) Fourth Basic Assumption about incohesion—along with the concepts of aggregation and massification—provides vital insight into how **individual histories impact collective experiences**.

Nelly (F, 73): Struggles with isolation versus a desire for connection; her initial quietness transformed into a willingness to engage.

Aron (M, 76): Embodies a duality of dominance and vulnerability; his loud persona conceals deep regrets, impacting group discussions.

Ginger (F, 69): Balances self-reliance with over-responsibility, often complicating interactions by attempting to fix others' issues.

Melody (F, 67): Exhibits a need for approval intertwined with suppressed anger, creating tension in her engagements with others.

Mariana (F, 68): Conflicted loyalties evoke dependence and independence, complicating her group interactions.

Freya (F, 52): Exhibits vulnerability stemming from past traumas, contrasted with emerging resilience, which presents challenges for both her and the group in navigating her distress.

Nando (M, 82): Reflects a tension between responsibility and storytelling fragmentation; his life dynamics oscillate between reassurance and anxiety among members.

Madeline (F, 70): Displays emotional restraint paired with anxiety, resulting in a dynamic of silence and sporadic outbursts that complicate her relationships within the group.

Me (conductor): Fear of Acceptance vs. Desire for Belonging - Growing up in a polarized society and family environment led to a fear of mistakes and rejection, influencing my choices throughout life.

Despite the desire for acceptance and belonging, this fear often manifested as reluctance to express vulnerability and emotion in group settings, leading to internal conflict.

Ideological Conflict vs. Personal Beliefs: I experienced a polarization between the ideological views of my group members—particularly regarding communism and democracy—and personal beliefs. I remained surprised at the group's favourable view of communism, which challenged my own perceptions.

Vignettes manifest and latent context

Reading the vignettes, can be seen how some individual polarities came also as group polarities. Since the initial sessions of the closed group, members moved from idealisation of their status, to exhibiting sibling-like rivalry, fueled by intense exchanges around personal struggles. The expression of one individual's depression, triggered heated debates, exposing underlying tensions. As family traumas surfaced, a blaming dynamic developed, illustrating the complexities of communication and authority within the therapeutic space. Authority and its power to exclude became vivid enactment scene.

First session, as a closed group was smooth. They appeared like children in kindergarten, smiling and wondering 'what will happen here', 'we are the best selected from all the rest of members of the centre'.

Second session, the sibling's rivalry was at their best.

Nando missed the session. Aron was the only man in the group. The beginning was a bit silent. The members were looking at me asking "what are we going to discuss?" I didn't want to say much and tried just to smile, as I also was not sure what to do.

Melody: I am feeling depressed recently, someone was killed at a coffeeshop in front of where I live. I have felt depressed even before in my life.

The group first taken by surprise, involved in discussion. They all had something to say. Aron and Melody were loudly trying to convince the group about each-others argument. Melody was angry with how unfaithful men were in the times of the other regime.

Melody: They wanted to have girlfriends but then will marry only with the virgins. We were poor and many children. Of course, the son of the doctor would not take me...his family wouldn't let him.

Aron rejected her argument, at the same time smiling devilishly. Everybody speaking loudly. Ginger and Mariana seemed wanted to compete with the attention that Aron and Melody were getting.

By the end of the session Mariana engaged very passionately about women's power in the communist regime. Aron decided to interrupt her with his strong voice.

Aron: I want to say something.

Mariana replied instantly: No, you won't. I will finish first then you will continue.

Some mentioned: Why don't you let him speak?

Mariana: Why should I? Only because he is a man?

She continued her argument but seemed the members in the room were not comfortable with what happened. After she finished her speech, I asked.

Me: Aron how are you?

Aron: No, it's all good. I am not coming anymore in this group.

Me: I am sorry that you felt bad! What is disturbing you?

Aron: I have decided, I will leave this group.

The group was left perplexed.

Third session - Half of the members missed the session, Aron also missed. Only one man was in the group - Nando. It was hard in the beginning for members to engage. Mariana opened up talking about her family problems, her harsh father, her spoiled brother (being the only one among four sisters - gave him a special status). She shared how her father did line up the siblings, when it was time for punishment, slapping them one by one, and this was justified. But when her brother did it, she was so angry, yet she could not complain. Even if she did, no one will listen to her.

The group wasn't ready for this level of sharing, they looked embarrassed. They claimed that they had very good relations with their families, leaving her alone. A little later Mariana echoed the group's distancing:

Mariana - They are my family, and they did it for me. It was good, and I don't deny it.

My countertransference was of a bad mother not teaching her properly.

Me - Mariana if you had children how would you reprimand them?

Mariana - I would listen to them, push them for the best and also be harsh with them.

Me - Would you hit them?

Mariana - No I would not.

Me - Than why would you say, 'it was good they did it'?

Mariana - Maybe I would do the same to my children, I don't know....no no I would be harsh with them, but not hit them.

Melody seemed scared; I asked her: How does this relate to you?

Melody - Nothing to do with my family. No, our parents were very supportive for us, and my father was very sensitive.

Nando seemed distressed, moving in his chair. I invited him to share of any connection to his story. He shared how he took care for his sick brothers during all his life, his sufferings when living 3 families in a small apartment, and been forced to move to another city for some years. After him Ginger shared about her alcoholic brother, and the problems he caused to their relationship. Then the group got energetically involved into 'women blaming men' for all the bad things that had happened in their lives.

I was concerned about Nando showing he was feeling distressed again.

Me - I want to call the group's attention; Nando seems a bit distressed. Nando is there anything bothering you?

Nando smiled shyly.

Me – Is it possible that when we are more women in the group, the language of discussion can be excluding the only man in the group? I have in mind Aron's reaction last time as well.

Mariana - I think they don't feel comfortable because they want to talk all the time themselves.

Me - Mariana you also seem to enjoy plenty of time when you talk.

Ginger – No, I think Aron decided not to come because he was interrupted by Mariana.

Mariana - We listened to both of them...and Aron interrupted me as well, so I asked to let me finish. The group was ready to enter in the fight mode.

Me – Interestingly both of you felt were interrupted by each-other. What if this is a group process? I hope Aron will come, and we can discuss this together. We don't know what invisible strings we may pull with our stories. Today was a lot to witness, but maybe we have helped each-other also.

Mariana took one lipstick from her purse, and started to apply it.

Nando - Can I leave?

Me - No, we have to finish the group first. I understand that something of what was shared is bothering you. Do you know what may be?

Ginger justified that in their age is difficult to be seated for so long. Maybe to consider 2 shorter sessions in a week. Mariana refused the idea on my behalf.

Me - If it was for me I could stretch out and find a solution, but it is not correct. Ginger as a nurse, when you medicate people you need to do it at exact times, dosage and length of days, if not the result can't be sure. Is it right? Is the same here.

Melody – No need for shorter session, when we are here we don't feel the time.

Nando shared about his son returning from emigration, and himself helping his wife with cooking. Ginger shared the conservative position of her mother-in-law, criticizing her son as too soft, for helping Ginger with ironing and coking. Then immediately justified her mother-in-law' behaviour as needed in order to protect family members by possible abuse from the Party Secretary. The families with 'bad biography' were under this risk.

The discussion moved to how rules were interpreted as per the understanding of the Secretary of the Party in the village, city or region. Sometimes, even what to cook at a farewell funeral lunch. But 'it **wasn't the fault** of the Party, just few **people with bad personalities**'.

Nando - Once, I was called and questioned from the 1st Secretary of the City because I did not stay at the funeral lunch of a work colleague. I was told 'He could offer lunch to all 15 colleagues. You offended him.'

Me - How would he know?

Melody - Lots of people enjoyed speaking up and down....

Mariana - Yes it was a lot of interfering but also we used to visit each other, when we had a new tv, or washing machine, or refrigerator. And now no one visits any more...

Me – Are we saying that it was better?

All the group engaged in the same feeling.

Me – What about the spying, and forcing one out?

All the group thought - People were warmer to each other....

Aron's Story from Individual Sessions: Aron entered the community centre with an air of entitlement, often behaving as if he was the favourite among the attendees. He hailed from a large, hierarchically structured conservative family - questioning paternal authority was simply not permitted. In this family dynamic, his mother took on the role of a housewife, which was unusual during the communist regime and highlighted the strict traditional roles they upheld at home.

As a child, he experienced a lot of upheaval, moving from one city to another because of his father's job, which brought its own share of instability into his life. By his early twenties, he decided to leave military school, a choice that marked a turning point in his journey. After a fight with a classmate, a family friend (an important official in the army), chose to punish Aron publicly. This act of humiliation profoundly affected Aron; feeling deeply ashamed, he fled the school and never returned.

The Group's Evolution

The natural history of my group resonated with Foulkes' notion that groups evolve through their unique dynamics; individual histories interweave **to create a collective narrative of struggle and growth**. Aron did not return to the group. In the following sessions, became evident that Aron's departure represented a recurrent theme in his life decisions. He often returned to disrupt the group dynamics even though he was not present. He tried to convince some of the group members not to continue (he had a better idea how to spend time together); asked members what was discussed; questioned the members need to open up in the group; once he even 'invaded' the therapy room to play domino leaving only after strong debates; other times he teased members 'go inside, your crazy group is starting'.

While any time we would see each-other, he would greet me loudly for everyone around to hear; ask about my health, work, and family though we never had a close relationship; then he would comment that the only reason he could come back to the sessions was out of respect for me but not for the others.

His attempts to engage with me or deride other members underscored his unresolved internal conflicts and the group's collective struggles with authority and division. He represented the authority out of the group, that watched over 'us' and wanted to be informed on what happened in the group.

The group sessions stretched from August 2021 to November 2023, embodying the most combative dynamics I have encountered thus far. The interplay among members often led to projection, exclusion and scapegoating, taking on the role of "the bad object" (Klein). This was particularly directed at men like Aron and Nando, reflecting deeper societal norms where **male vulnerability** was met with **aggression**. Other members, like Mariana and Freya, who tapped into their histories of trauma, also became focal points for projection and conflict.

It required significant reflection and supervision for me to distil the emotional atmosphere that manifested in the group. Their capacity to mirror each other's experiences facilitated validation and catalysed personal struggles, yet often led to a cycle of denial about shared shame. Time after time I found myself as the **container** where the group would **locate their numbness** - continuously I experienced moments that I couldn't think, though I was listening very carefully. Their dissociation was

so powerful, they would speak about the most difficult memories, and have no expression of feelings, just facts.

Albanian culture, rife with historical conflicts and trauma, emphasized a **polarization** between **shame** and **pride**, **honesty** and **dishonesty**, presenting challenges for emotional expression. The consequences of the 45 years of dictatorial communist regime further complicated these dynamics as individuals expressed anger and frustration towards figures of authority, often re-enacting historical marginalization across personal narratives. Drawing on Melanie Klein's (1946) theories, I recognized the absence of open conflict and aggression toward me, is likely a defense mechanism wherein members projected an idealized "good" parental figure onto me, seeking a nurturing anchor to address their anxieties about authority without feeling directly challenged. Further expanding on Winnicott's (1971) idea on the lack of the holding environment in childhood, that without sufficient emotional containment, individuals **act out rather than work through their emotions**.

Theoretical Reflections on the Group Process

Foulkes's (1948) concept on Matrix and Resonance is expressed looking at the group functions as a **social matrix**, where **individual conflicts resonate at a collective level**. Mariana's struggle with paternal authority resonates across the group, making it a shared dynamic. At the same time, her dominance in conversations mirrors past hierarchical family structures, where male privilege was contested or enforced through power struggles.

Klein's (1946) emphasis on **splitting** illustrates how group members navigate their internal worlds, often seeing others as either **"good" or "bad"**. This splitting is evident in the polarities displayed by members like Aron and Melody. Aron's commanding presence simultaneously masks vulnerability and guilt about past rejections, while Melody's oscillation between seeking approval and harbouring repressed anger, illustrates the complexity of their interactions. These internal conflicts often manifested as projections in the group setting, leading to either aggressive outbursts or excessive deference, as participants attempt to engage with their unresolved feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

Winnicott's (1971) perspective on cultural experience is also essential in understanding these relational patterns. The narratives shared by group members reveal how Albania's historical and cultural context—marked by wars, invasions, and a past shaped by polarizing ideologies—has significantly influenced their emotional landscapes. These cultural dynamics are crucial in understanding how aggression, both personal and collective, finds its roots within the group.

By being old, these group members represent another pole of the society. According to Ezquerro & Cañete the importance of understanding intergenerational conflicts emerges as a crucial element in this therapeutic setting. The older members' lived experiences create a different coloured picture of conflict, struggle and realities that contrasts sharply with the view and understanding of younger generations. In their view not everything was bad under the communist regime..

Furthermore, Hopper's (1992) Fourth Basic Assumption illuminates the interplay between individual and group dynamics. While the members share experiences related to their age and life under the communist regime, their individual narratives present a rich tapestry of conflict and struggle. As collective grievances emerged during discussions—such as Melody's, Mariana's and Ginger's frustrations regarding men during past regimes—the deeper socio-political contexts became apparent, fostering unresolved issues that clashed during group interactions.

The massification aspect of Hopper's (1992) theory manifests in how diverse backgrounds can inadvertently lead to the suppression of individual voices in favor of a collective identity. As members rallied around shared anxieties, they often restricted the expression of dissenting opinions, particularly when it concerned authority figures within the group (Aron, Me-conductor). This dynamic resulted in chaotic discussions where the loudest voices dominated, overshadowing quieter members who held significant contributions, reinforcing the theme of conformity over authenticity.

Conclusion

The interplay of personal and communal polarities has profoundly influenced my development as a therapist. By integrating concepts like Koinonia and the social unconscious, I've gained a deeper understanding of therapeutic experiences. My nurturing instincts facilitated conflict resolution and promoted open emotional expression.

Exploring the complexities of authority in therapy revealed how these polarities affected my practice and the group. The reluctance to discuss my authority, is rooted in individual histories and defense mechanisms, leading to harmony at the expense of genuine dialogue. The group's conflicts reflected deeper themes of incohesion and intergenerational trauma that shaped responses to authority and vulnerability.

In conclusion, navigating these complex conflicts, influenced by historical contexts and interpersonal dynamics, **embracing rather than erasing** such polarities, **offers pathways** toward deeper self-understanding and healing within the group.

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