Max Praed

A Group Experience

We started five minutes late. The advanced members were to be differentiated from the rest. I was glad to see this because in the groups I had already attended I felt that I, and others with previous experience, were virtually forced by the situation to appear either ignorant or power-hungry.

This course, on the other hand, had been arranged with a hierarchical structure of director and staff, an elite of advanced members and a base of participants with no previous group experience. This was explained at the preliminary meeting, after which various people asked for clarification. The course director, Paul de Berker, stone-walled with:
'It's up to you',
'It remains to be seen',
'We'll see how it works out', and so on.

After the staff went out at 9 o'clock, there was a good deal of discussion about the various options open to members of the advanced training group. We had been told that in the first session we were to be placed geographically away from the other people, apparently to test the effects of the hierarchical structure.

We were expected to do two things: to carry out the tasks of the group as a whole which was to study the behaviour of the group as it occurred and we were also expected to adopt the task given to the staff, viz. to assist the group in this task of studying group behaviour as it occurred.
"Do we have to do the expected? we could resist attempts to break us up and stick together.'
'What's the point of that?'
'Free will - we're allowed to exercise it.'
'Shall we try to find out about each other? Is there anyone else connected with university adult education?'
'Why do you want to do this?'
'Well, I want to identify people with the same interests because I think it is important that we should try to relate what we are doing to our professional situations back home and I'd know whether anyone else had the same interests as I.'
'I don't think that's a good idea. It's just a matter of labelling.'
'I like my label. I'm interested in your field. I've given some university extension courses.'
'Well, we've done something. We've established the fact that in our group some of us like to be labelled and some of us don't.'

Nobody else made any attempt to identify professional interests and there was no mention of names except that someone asked should we give out names and I said I did not find names very important because I had a rotten memory for them anyway. I noticed it was about 9.30 and it seemed other people did too because a few minutes later someone slowly walked out, followed by the others.

In the main, the theme of the first two sessions was silence and its interpretation. The group split fairly soon into five people who were prepared to talk and three who were not. The consultant signalled the coffee break in the Grubb/Tavistock style by shining her torch on her wrist watch and walking out silently.

This seemed to exemplify a circular mode of interpretation in the Grubb/Tavistock style. Having reinforced the silent minority's behaviour with her own, the consultant later made an interpretation that silence equalled remaining uninvolved. This was tacitly rejected when the people who had been talking diagnosed the silent members as having been anxious, but fresh illumination was later cast on the matter when one of the minority members broke his silence by interpreting the behaviour of the talkative ones as anxiety. It seemed that as between the reticent and the loquacious, each put the label of anxiety on the behaviour of the others.

The consultant picked up a remark to the effect that people played games in groups and she wondered what game the silent members had been playing. Adequacy and relevance would have been better served, I thought, by pointing out the range of alternatives, viz. that children play games in groups, some adults play games in groups and some adults work in groups. There was a Freudian-type contribution when I said that the relation between the advanced group and the other members of this course was like that between lovers when one was more experienced than the other, whereas in groups not so structured members had no direct knowledge of each other's relative experience. As between members of the advanced group, on the other hand, the question of relative experience was not important as the fact that it had been established early that none was a virgin. There was no follow-up to this remark until considerably later when one of the silent members referred to me as the man who kept talking about having had previous experience in groups. I regarded this as a sign that the silent members' influence was going to be towards keeping the group's behaviour at a pregenital level.

The meeting on the second night began with a discussion on the violence of feeling between the two sub-groups the night before. The use of the word violent was questioned - the literal meaning of violence, i.e. physical violence. This word game led to the question of games and I said I thought I could detect three games that had been played the night before. The first, by the talkative group, seemed like a game children play with a ball - throwing it to one another, sometimes catching, sometimes missing it, but always keeping the ball in the air. On the other hand, I thought the second game, the one being played by the silent people, was like a game of hide and seek being played without dropping any clues. I thought the third game was the one being played by the consultant. I did not name it at the time but the game I had in mind was Rumpelstiltskin's - 'identify me and I shall turn your straw into gold'.

A woman who had been one of the silent group the night before discussed her transition from 'can't speak' to 'won't speak', although she said she would have spoken at any time if she had been asked a direct question. She denied that the silent people had formed a sub-group and said that when she had moved the previous night from amongst the talking people to a position between the two silent men she was really

inviting the remainder to have more interaction with those who were silent. One of the group invited one of the men who had been silent to speak. He did so at length with phrases such as 'Each man goes to hell his own way', 'The family destroys the baby', 'I think the group destroys you' and 'This is what you were born for'. I gradually came to feel that if these things were literal expressions of his beliefs he could be a psychopath, although his use of that form of words, 'I think the group destroys you', might have been an exaggeration and hence a provocation of the group.

After the coffee break was a large group meeting. I was one of the first in the room and helped Paul de Berker arrange or rather 'unarrange' the chairs by turning them around so that they were facing inwards, with no attempt to form any pattern. I commented jocularly to him that I had never before been one of the gremlins who set the scenes for group events and he replied in kind. For me the incident exemplified the difference between simple, human dyadic exchanges and those in a 'work group'.

Predictably the people who spoke first were neither in the advanced group nor staff members. Someone said vaguely that it would be impossible for people to introduce themselves as in small groups. Someone said it was nice and comfortable and easy and safe just to sit and be quiet. Someone expressed the feeling that there was a lot of latent anger in the passive, silent individuals. Interest quickened as people started discussing talkers and non-talkers in groups, particularly the question of hostility between these two sub-groups - the dominant theme of my small group. Comparing large and small groups, several people agreed it was easier not to talk in the large group; it was easier, as someone said, to disappear.

The question came up whether there was any need for leadership. Then came the questions: 'Are we here to work or play?' 'Are we a schoolroom without a master?' One of the advanced group disclosed that he was a schoolmaster and, as he said later, thereby tagged himself with that label for the rest of the course. One young woman criticised another as academic and intellectual and I came to the defence saying that the task of the group, to study its own behaviour as it occurred, presupposed the necessity for something like intellectual work. This was more or less accepted with the demurrer that butterflies and insects could be studied without much intellectual work. The notion that the group was studying itself as so many insects pinned on a board aroused a ripple of laughter.

After the large group ended, the advanced group met the staff who provided cider and biscuits and there was some jocular byplay to the effect that the advanced group loved the staff and the staff loved the advanced group .

The first event the next meeting was an exercise for the combined advanced groups. Four people by random selection were allotted 'staff' roles and went outside the room to be briefed. The remainder were told they were class members of an approved school, who had been singled out for special treatment. Immediately they began to play their roles as delinquents; first, under the leadership of two women, by barricading the door and then, when the 'staff' members pushed their way in by force, by being extremely unco-operative. This became the occasion for a great deal of paranoid playing-out and it was also notable for a very decisive splitting of the 'staff'

group. They divided at the outset when the one man amongst them had the main brunt of the task of pushing the door open. Then when they came in he took the lead and started explaining that the idea was for the 'staff' members to divide the remainder into groups of three for 'intensive treatment'. This immediately caused dissension amongst the 'staff'. One of them, who said she had been nominated as spokesman, got huffy and sat by herself.

After this came the intergroup exercise. Paul de Berker described the roles of 'messengers', 'ambassadors' and 'plenipotentiaries' which could be played by the members of self-selected groups meeting in various other rooms. The staff would remain in that room as a group, each with 'plenipotentiary' posers. When the exercise began, everybody walked out quickly. I lingered in the room with the staff, wanting to stay but not prepared to do so without any support at all. As I was moving slowly towards the door three members of the beginners' group came in so I stayed with them. The situation became difficult and embarrassing. The staff discussed us in emotive terms such as 'a rump', 'moths around a fire', 'children hanging around their parents' and so on. We discussed whether we were a group or not. I did not think we were, but the others acted as if we were. It was a fascinating experience which I rationalised as making the most of a learning opportunity rather than playing according to the rules. An interesting episode was when a young woman, who had been noticeably negative in the large group meeting the night before, came in and said she was an ambassador from a new group and she had been sent to invite the staff to brighten up the proceedings of this group and to signal the fact that they were prepared to do so by smiling at her. The staff took this as being on a level of facetiousness that they did not want to go along with and sent her away, asking her to come back when she could say something about the real mood underlining this strange request. She did not return. The emotional peak of the episode was when one of the staff, saying he could not hear another clearly, pulled his chair around so as to present his back to us in what appeared to be a final act of rejection.

I had no desire to continue this experience so, after the coffee break I returned to the room where I had been the previous night, told the group meeting there what I had done the previous session and was accepted by them after a discussion on a fairly jocular level. It was suggested that my presence might reinforce the advanced group members as against the beginners. My main learning experiences throughout this exercise were interpersonal and intra-group. Our group seemed to be operating at an adult level and this impression was reinforced by the results of our contacts with other groups. Thus we gave a young man plenipotentiary power to observe other groups. He had described himself as an outsider and inexperienced but it was felt that by offering him plenipotentiary power the group was behaving in a way that recognised the compatibility of freedom with power. When he returned he reported that the other groups were mostly arguing in a desultory fashion. Again, we received a messenger from the little 'rump' group. She explained that the remainder had strengthened their group ties during the coffee break and they were with the staff group again. They were asking our group to go en masse to 'force the staff to leave that room'. We told her we would reply by messenger and after she had gone we talked about it. The feeling gradually strengthened that we should refuse, but at the same time offer to let those people join our group. This offer - a mature gesture in the circumstances - was

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declined. More and more the exercise seemed to be demonstrating the extent to which a small group could function in a relaxed, co-operative manner despite the existence of a hierarchical structure with the degrees of arrogance, exclusiveness and unwillingness to learn that I had observed in the staff's actions and attitudes early in the session.

The next night the theme that first emerged was the relation of delinquent behaviour to the work of the group as a whole and the consultant pointed out that one of the men who had been silent on the first night was acting like a consultant. I said she seemed to be saying there was a behaviour. I had in mind an incident during a median group exercise involving one of the most experienced participants - in fact he was on the examining board of the Institute of Group Analysis. He had been sitting silently for a while and all of a sudden he said: 'Why am I behaving the way I am? I'm a qualified consultant; I know how to behave as a consultant'. He fell silent, whereupon a woman asked him a question to clarify his remarks and he merely sat in silence. The woman got very upset, but despite her distress and annoyance he did not say a word. The only comment his behaviour drew from a consultant was that he had decided not to let the group use him and manipulate him - he had decided to behave like a consultant. In another interpretation, if a person wanted to behave like a consultant he would cut himself off from the normal canons of social and group intercourse. During the evening I was again caught up in exchange with the man who in the first session had said that groups were destructive. I said this view of groups entailed that somehow he had to destroy the group process before it destroyed him. In retaliation he said that from my accent I might be North American, and North Americans were the greatest conformists in the world - in group work terribly concerned to conclude with everybody loving everybody else and everything in the garden rosy. All this, despite the fact that on the first night I had said the opposite. As this was the final meeting of our original group I said I wanted to tie up loose ends to which he replied: 'Why should we want to tie up loose ends? Why should we worry about the group? People in groups are committed to the individual, not the group'. He went on to say he did not feel any commitment to God, only to the individual. Many groups seemed moved by a necessity to do something and to be seen to be doing something. They felt a need to impress, a need to get their money's worth, but he was not activated by any of these motives at all. He kept saying the individual was paramount, the individual was king and he had no real regard for the group process, and this was the note on which our group ended its work.

The next night started with the first combined meeting of the two advanced groups since the preliminary meeting a week before the course had begun and it exhibited all the signs of another beginning. A long silence was finally broken by the consultant who asked whether it were a cosy silence or a stony confrontation and although this did not cause a flow of material immediately, it did break the ice and it fairly quickly emerged that there was a pattern of confrontations between and within the two sub-groups.

The second session was a plenary review of the inter-group exercise. The advanced group members had been asked to occupy the front rows but some did not, thereby disclosing a significant degree of disintegration. Some people at both levels felt that the advanced members were a kind of buffer between staff and beginners. Not liking

this role, some of the advanced group were sitting well back. There was a lot of discussion about the difference between the advanced group and the others. My contribution was again in sexual terms. The people in the advanced group had been relatively more experienced when the course began but by then, the fifth day, everybody had accumulated experience, so none was a virgin.

After a while the course director asked to hear about the experiences of those who had stayed in the room with the staff at the beginning of the intergroup exercise. I said I had felt like an observer, but what I had observed in the staff group was not mature behaviour. I said it was exhibitionistic and narcissistic, and seeing that such behaviour was not gentle behaviour any more than it was genital behaviour, something fairly rough was bound to occur. When it did so I was intrigued to note that the member of staff who performed the final act of divisiveness and exclusion was the one whose title proclaimed him to be a Christian. While I was saying this there were continuous interruptions from the main body of the meeting; there was laughter; they were calling out that my place was at the rear. There seemed to be a good deal of embarrasment, support, discharge of tension and contradictory feelings.

The final session that night was an application group and for this the staff divided all the course members, except the advanced group, into small groups based somewhat loosely on their professional at-home situations. They gave the advanced group a choice of meeting as an application group or joining the other groups, and eight or nine of us stayed as a group. I expected to learn more this way than by going through the slow process of warming up with yet another new group - and it seemed to work out successfully as a number of vital themes emerged. What was the relation between cognitive and affective learning? Was speaking one's feelings in groups really revelation or concealment of them, and how did this dichotomy relate to the immaturity-maturity continuum? I had resolved not to be the first to speak, and when I mentioned this it led to a discussion about the silent and talkative members. Was it simply a question of being 'experienced' or 'innocent' in groups? A schema of group development was propounded by the woman who had been one of the silent members at the first small group session. She said that group work, whether structured or unstructured, began with a base from which emerged sets of sub-groups or pairs out of which developed a re-organisation. I noted the similarity of this to the marxist dialectical progression of thesis to antithesis to synthesis which became the thesis for a new development. I noted also that this was a very constructive session at which the member whose early contributions I had regarded as delinquent or sociopathic was not present.

On the following night was the final meeting of all the advanced group members. There was some post-mortem discussion about the application groups sessions the previous night and one woman said, to fairly general agreement, that there had been a flight which she regarded as almost panic departure following the plenary review of the intergroup exercise. The point about development being by splitting and reorganisation was made again and it seemed generally agreed that something happened in groups analogous to birth, development and death - but this did not explain how groups went wrong. Someone said the significant thing was the contradiction between patterns of behaviour and new experiences and this was interpreted in two different ways. One person said patterns could be interpreted as

security and new experiences as insecurity. I said the opposite might also be true because the establishment of patterns could be the result of insecurity whereas it was only from a feeling of security that people could go out and seek new experiences. I put forward my idea that the total course was an exercise in living within a bureaucratic, pyramidal structure. This came under fire because it was assumed I was saying the course was a failure and blaming the structure set by the staff. This was a misrepresentation of the way I was trying to look at the exercise as a whole.

The final session that night, on the at-home application of what we had learned during the inter-group exercise, started with the advanced group appearing set to do nothing but argue about its own dissension. After a few minutes a member named C moved his chair and sat outside the group silently. I said I thought the first job of a group - the only job necessary to enable it to start working as a group - was to tackle the problem of C's movement away from it. This was rejected, by one young man particularly, who later said he was unable to concentrate on the work we were doing because he had one ear cocked in the direction of the staff group at the other end of the room. Someone suggested he should sit halfway down the room so he could hear what was going on in both camps and amidst the reception of this idea I said if we were all going to vote with our feet this was the way I felt, and I sat beside C and asked him how he felt. He suggested going outside to talk about it, so we went out first to the corridor and then, on his further initiative, to the group in the room where we had originally met. We were received in a very mature and welcoming way after an initial complaint that we had broken their train of thought. We acknowledged this and they resumed their previous discussion. After a time the question of playing the intergroup game according to the rules came up and we accepted an invitation from the staff group to send two plenipotentiaries to join their group.

We who remained then settled down to a discussion in which we agreed by consensus not to play the game of ambassadors, plenipotentiaries and messengers any more. Consequently when a plenipotentiary from the advanced group invited us to send a delegate to talk about dissension within a group, I suggested that rather than talk about dissension she should stay and watch a group working in harmony. She did so and we continued the discussion - mostly at the experiential feeling level - of management training progràmmes, the sociological and religious significance of groups and the extent to which group results could be tested. After some time she made an extraordinary statement to the effect that she had seen how our group worked - by opting out of the entire exercise - and she walked out. Later we examined her remark and concluded that it had to be rejected as either a projection or an expression of envy. We had, after all, played the international relations game until we decided against it and applied what we had learned in the exercise to our at-home situation.

Later I became convinced that the envy expressed by this woman had been caused by seeing C and me - the two rebels or refugees from the advanced group - sitting with others. This seemed to explain the resentment with which C and I were met when we went to the social or semi-social meeting of the advanced group with the staff, after the last session that night. I felt the hostility explicitly when I mentioned the word 'game' in connection with the inter-group exercise and a previously friendly fellow-Australian woman said, 'You make a game of everything.'

I made the superficial reply that in fact we had been carrying out an exercise with rules that could be described as a game, but the crucial problem was not explored. It involved the relation between work and play, between children's play and adult work and in adult life the relation between making plans and getting on with living. On the sexual side there was the relation of love-play with the 'business' of sex, viz. intercourse or procreation.

So I felt that the hostility in my being accused of making everything a game was very complex in that a 'spokesman' was expressing a distillation of reactions in a group to those who finally, when they became dissatisfied with a game of words, particularly the game of 'naming' feelings instead of actually feeling them, had been enough to get up and leave. It was interesting that C and I had made our moves by a real interchange of leadership function. I had moved to him and he had suggested going into the other group. But afterwards I had made the initiating move for us to go to the subsequent meeting. I would not have left the room if he had not led me and he would not have gone to the subsequent meeting unless I had led him. This seemed an example of how a dyad, virtually in desperation, could break away from a group within a bureaucratic structure and strive for life, to be followed by the envy of those who had not felt free enough or 'playful' enough to do so.

The application inter-group exercise on the next night started with further discussion about the relation of work and play and the 'state of health' of the advanced group. Our group decided to visit the therapeutic group - ours being largely a management group - where the question of at-home application came up for further discussion. I took few notes of this very interesting session and realised for the first time that my post hoc account of the proceedings would be not only inescapably subjective but heavily slanted to reflect those times when I was puzzled by something or in disagreement with somebody, rather than many of the times when I was most interested and when there was a harmonious atmosphere.

The large combined group that night began with a silence that I decided to time, despite some disparaging remarks made earlier about people who noticed and measured things of this kind - also people who make notes. Incidentally, a young woman who was taking notes throughout the course was questioned and criticised about it several times in my presence, although my taking notes was not at any time directly queried or challenged or even mentioned by anybody. The silence lasted seven minutes and was broken by a young man who said we were waiting for something to happen. This was the young man who at various times had made adverse comments when other people said something terribly obvious. In all the previous beginnings of new types of sessions, the course director had spoken first. He did not do so on this occasion so the silence was to be expected. When the young man who broke the silence was asked what he was waiting for he said he was waiting for the answers to a lot of questions. And when peppered with 'why' and 'when' and 'how' he said it was near the end of the course but he did not know who was going to answer these questions and it seemed everybody was waiting for the staff to do so as a kind of report. I remarked that the point about time running out had been made by one of the youngest members of the group, who in the 'life' sense had more time than most of the others to wait for things to happen.

For this session the chairs were in concentric circles, like a spider's web, and as they came in people sat everywhere except in the centre. After a while someone suggested there were five groups of talkative people - one fairly close to the centre and those who sat at each of the four 'corners' of the big circle. The resemblance of this structure to the plan of a pyramid came out of the discussion and seemed to be of some importance. It was in fact pointed out by the young man who, the night before, had denied my suggestion that this hierarchical pyramid was the shape the course had taken. Someone asked whether the role of the advanced group was to manage the course or simply to talk about doing so. A member of the staff interpreted the early silence and slow beginning as a desperate attempt by all concerned to overlook the difficulties of the course. This was another 'circular' interpretation as more than 20 minutes had elapsed after the session began before anything was said by a staff member. People debated whether 'to relate' simply equalled 'to learn' in a group setting. There was a general feeling that the first small group in which most people had found themselves had claimed their allegiance later. Someone asked whether the staff were a group. Again a division between the speakers and the silent members came up.

'Is this a game?' someone asked. The comment came back: 'It's a moral judgement to say whether people's behaviour is a game or not.' Then came the interpretation that people were looking for an 'anchorage'. Many as they came in had simply 'hooked' themselves on to someone they knew. Someone said people seemed to be clinging rather desperately to little bits of experience here and there and someone else made the obvious point that some people were working harder than others. It was mentioned that each person who said something feared being hurt and this fitted in well with the 'tally-ho' reaction I had noticed in this and many other groups. That is, when someone says something fairly bright it's like the white tail of a rabbit bobbing into sight and the whole bloody pack sets out after that person in hot pursuit. There was general agreement when someone said there was intense frustration expressing itself both in the people who spoke and in those who remained silent. The general atmosphere of disruptiveness at this large group meeting and permeating much of the course did seem to show that on the whole it was an unpleasant experience if looked at purely from the point of view of the pleasure-anxiety continuum. But for purposes of identifying the blockages to adult social learning this destructiveness and frustration were probably constructive.

Towards the end of this session, the young woman who, like myself, had been taking notes, was again attacked for doing so and I told her she had been my scapegoat. But why was she attacked while I was not? Perhaps she was a scapegoat, not for me but for a few women in the advanced group whose dominant and aggressive personalities had been labelled as 'castrating influences' on the course members generally - both men and women. She defended herself by saying, 'But you always take notes when you try to learn something.' She was likening the situation to a school or college and she had challenged the group's habit of claiming it was in a learning situation but not taking notes. Had she made people feel guilty or aroused their envy?

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