

# ***A Humanistic Therapist Joins the Analysts: Foulkes and the IGA***

*Alyss Thomas*

---

No one said anything. Eight of us and a conductor — who seemed more accustomed to the situation than we were — sat in a small circle on hard chairs in what appeared to be a geography seminar room. None of us knew what to expect, what was expected of us, what to say, how other people might react to us. After checking out my assumptions about the other people in the room, I decided I didn't have anything in common with any of them, and wondered why I had come. The conductor remained unhelpful, and we were all particularly absorbed by the pattern of the wooden floor tiles between our feet. The atmosphere seemed to me then, as it would through the 30 sessions we were to experience together, to be intent, focused and spacious all at once, as if something intense or special might happen, or perhaps something explosive and uncomfortable. It was a difficult atmosphere in which to break the silence: once broken, there was no knowing what would happen to your words. People would listen intently, but then they would make whatever they wanted out of it, and your own individual meaning would float up on a far distant shore, far from its origins, as a message that would become the property of the group and of the ongoing process of group

transformation.

Somehow on that first evening someone did manage to break the silence: we introduced ourselves, started to interact; likes and dislikes were formed, relationships established and we gradually became a group. This was part of the introductory course in group analysis, which is available in cities across the country each year. As a humanistic/transpersonal psychotherapist, I joined the course out of a sense of curiosity about what a more analytic approach to working with groups would actually entail.

The first evening we were given lists of names telling us who was in each of three small analytic groups, each conducted by a different member of staff. Care was taken to ensure members didn't know one another before joining. For the rest of the year we spent the second part of each evening in these groups. During the first two terms the first part of the evening alternated between seminars, which we prepared ourselves, and lectures from visiting analysts on a range of topics, from transference issues in groups to therapeutic use of metaphors. The quality and depth of these presentations varied widely, but some of them were fresh and exciting. In the third term, the first part of the evening was

*Alyss Thomas is a psychotherapist, counselling trainer and writer.*

spent in one large, or median, group, with all the course members and staff present. The course was well organised and structured and its methodology was in line with its theoretical content. People were able to work at different levels and depths. Most of the members were from the various helping professions and had felt they wanted more understanding of how to function in self-help, addiction or similar groups.

### *The Silent Group Leader*

It took me a long time to get used to the comparative silence of the therapist after having been in humanistic groups, where the group facilitator takes a more visibly active role. I and my fellow members experienced this variously as indifference, lack of involvement, inability to take the lead or greater interest in group members other than ourselves. In fact when we became brave enough to address him directly on these issues we found that none of these was the case, that he was highly involved and attentive and responded with empathy whenever he was called to do so. The conductor in a group situation resists the pressure to direct or influence its members, or to do anything for them that he feels they are capable of doing for themselves. However it is highly provocative to have a silent group leader, and not everyone felt that he was benign. This silence can easily be experienced as withholding and persecutory if you have never come across the 'analytic attitude' before. On the other hand, the conductor clearly held on to his authority at times in defining boundaries, his role, what was expected when people left, and what he was prepared to talk about. If someone was attacked or was feeling vulnerable, he did in fact intervene.

This made the group feel like a safe enough container for some of us to explore our feelings and relationships in more depth, though it also had the effect of making two members decide to leave.

The Institute of Group Analysis was created by S.H. Foulkes, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who left Germany for England in 1933 and died over here in 1976. The Institute is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year, and the approach is now used in many different countries. Group analysis synthesises various aspects of psychoanalysis, gestalt psychology, systems theory and social psychology, as well as the unusual and fertile ideas of W.S. Bion, so it is not a 'pure' or rigid form of psychoanalysis. Some group analysts are traditional followers of Foulkes, and some are more innovative. In practice I have found group analysts vary widely in their approach, and that the theory is a broad and deep stream which encompasses various ways of working in a group. Although transference is picked up and worked with, there is a clear emphasis on showing how the here-and-now situation is both similar to and different from the past, and members are generally encouraged to make constructive use of the difference, to use the group for reality-testing and to try out new ways of relating within it. Interpretation is used, but not exclusively. This is different to some analytic approaches where the main goal is insight.

### *Taking the Non-Problem Seriously*

Group analysis is preoccupied with the idea that the healthy human organism exists in relation to others in a group, and that we are a social species that lives en-

tirely in relation to groups. As in the figure-ground relationship of gestalt theory, each individual member of the group is seen in relation to the whole. The therapist is considered a part of the ever changing dynamic interactions of the group space, and therapy of individuals takes place in the group and by the group. Although the therapist — known as the conductor — gives attention to individual members, her overall free-floating attention is given to the group itself. An important concept in group analytic thinking is that of the group matrix. This is understood as a transpersonal network of communication. Each member holds one corner of this net, and each communication expresses something of the group mind. Thus the process of the group, as well as dealing with the individual issues which people bring, is a journey of discovery about the nature of the particular group mind that has been created. This understanding in turn feeds back into people's individual issues. An idea I found intriguing is known as 'taking the non-problem seriously', developed by Caroline Garland. In her paper by this title she explores the fact that group analysts don't exactly know why groups work and appear to help people. It's not the time spent discussing individual problems, which is often minimal as there are so many different and passionate topics to talk about in a group that is working well. In fact people find themselves talking about all sorts of things which are nothing to do with their problems — the 'non-problem'. Garland says that this is 'the foundation stone upon which change in the individual is constructed'. In this discussion individuals get more and more involved in an alternative system to their own, an entirely different

system to the one in which their individual difficulties arose, a system in which new rules apply. By immersing themselves in this new system, the influence of the system that made them feel bad lessens. This is one way to describe the highly involving, and often uplifting and energising experience of being part of a lively group in which everyone is participating fully and, as a result, getting a new perspective on their life situations.

An interesting movement within group analysis is the exploration of destructive and creative forces in group life. The theory of the 'anti-group' looks at the negative forces that often undermine or even pull groups apart, and understanding these ambivalent processes can help you make better use of the creative potential that is also present. A lot of things that happen in therapy or personal development groups are neither therapeutic nor constructive, and they often appear to be driven by forces that the individuals in the group feel unable to face. Phenomena such as avoiding talking about hot potatoes, hostility, resistance, complaining, scapegoating, not turning up, or not meeting membership requirements are all indicative that something powerful that is calling for attention is taking place in the group matrix on an unconscious level. In my experience of running therapeutic and personal development groups on counselling courses my positive, spacious humanistic attitude hasn't always been robust enough to cope with these forces, and I have felt the need for tools fashioned for the deeper, darker side of human nature which can so easily emerge.

I would recommend the IGA course to anyone who is interested in exploring group forces in a relatively safe and well held environment. There are lots of opportunities for discussion of the experiences

and ideas which come up. Although when I facilitate groups now I probably do not actually do anything different, I do have a fuller and richer sense that being a group

facilitator or member is to be part of a complex and dynamic world, and that groups are microcosmic versions of our wider social system.

---

---

## ***Group Processes***

*John Rowan*

---

### *Angry*

Yes, I was angry.

Through the whole meeting I felt the blood coming into my face, the anger mounting inside me.

I let it off first at the two ladies — the one I thought was Miss W. was Miss M., and the one I thought was Miss M. was Miss W.

I let it off to the doctor — only I must call him Pierre from now on — but it was still there at the end.

I was still angry when he stalked out the door on the dot of 7.30.

I think I was more angry than the group wanted me to be, but there was a lot of coming-out-from-behind, and I think I helped that.

Tonight, the group seemed more alive.

### *Fantasy I*

I just want you to open up a little bit, to be just a bit more warm and accepting.

I felt you last time as rejecting and hostile, and you made me feel more rejecting and hostile to you.

It is not you personally I feel hostile towards, but what you are doing to me by your most frequent manner.

You are stopping me being able to concentrate on my own feelings and the group's concern, and forcing me to spend my energy in resistance to you.

I cannot think or feel straight when I am in a state of anger and rage.

What enrages me is your authoritarian attempt to dominate the group.

At first I thought it might be the group doing it to itself through you, but the more we go on, the clearer it becomes that it is you doing it. I am not even sure that any member of the group wants it.

*John Rowan, author and practitioner, is a regular contributor to S&S. These poems are reprinted from his 1976 book, The Power of the Group.*