

GROUPS ARE A NECESSARY GOOD

Guy Gladstone

In the AHPP year 2000 handbook thirty-five of the 143 full and affiliate members listed lay claim to a groupwork qualification. Wondering what proportion of these members are currently running ongoing groups open to the public, I rang them up to find out. I spoke to three quarters of the thirty five members and only five were running such groups. I trust and hope more humanistic practitioners are doing it without saying so. But if that is the case why not bother to say so? To make a specific point here and for the purpose of this article from here on I am specifically not counting groupwork that is conducted under the auspices of practitioner training, where trainees are perforce gathered together in a group or groups, but interestingly are mostly only being taught counselling or psychotherapy as one-to-one practice. In such a context groupwork can readily be viewed as a necessary evil. My contention here, on the contrary, is that it is a necessary good.

DISCOURAGING FACTORS

To account for what I would maintain is a rather low figure (five) I reproduce here the gist of the replies I got when I probed as to why people were no longer running such groups. I append my own response to some of the data in brackets. People spoke of: running out of steam; a dearth of imagination as to how to organise a group and difficulties getting a group started; an increasing specialisation of practitioners; once it was 'in' but not now (why not?); centres no longer finding it financially viable; daunting overheads for the sole trader/individual practitioner without organisational backup and resources; a diversion of the personal growth imperative into groups to improve your presentation, these being offered especially by practitioners who have

moved into consultancy and working with corporate business (in keeping with the era of New Labour and the revamping of the public false self?); and as a corollary to this a reluctance to work in depth with more resistant issues such as shame, depression and narcissism.

Further reasons given were: can't compete with the counsellors; the public somehow not wanting it and demand seeming to drop, perhaps having reached saturation point (which public and when did this happen?); an exodus of practitioners out of private practice into organisations and counselling courses; people under 30 are reluctant to spend money unless the expenditure can be related to their job (a corollary of which is that even essentially experiential groups are marketed as training, with inducements such as Save £150 with

an Individual Learning Account tagged on, the administration of which is invariably beyond the resources of the therapist in private practice (functioning as a sole trader); central government making money available through colleges as part of its raft of social inclusion policies and the colleges concerned then latching onto the idea of running counselling skills courses as a soft option, -(why not offer surgery for beginners, NVQ'd of course); groups only booking when certificated (but for the general public wouldn't this be wholly irrelevant?); professionalisation's fear-driven dynamics putting practitioners off the higher levels of self-exposure that running a group entails for therapists.

Other opinions expressed were: practitioners failing to find intelligible forms of outreach in their marketing to the general public, a public which is now more sophisticated e.g. in its perception of psychobabble; a public brainwashed into wanting 'quickies' and cheaper solutions; ongoing groupwork as too demanding compared with the solace offered by visits to now ubiquitous complementary health practitioners; more free at the point of access or very low cost one-to-one counselling available through a variety of agencies (but note this is invariably short-term and it is rare for groupwork to be an option); groupwork available through the NHS tends to target adolescents and families (but with society moving steadily towards higher numbers of long term adult singles one might think groups were exactly where these people need to be if this drift is to be either affirmed or reversed); a public unable to afford more than (and perhaps only wanting) fixed-term ongoing groups with a skills-based content, deliverable in an educational setting.

After speaking to twenty-seven people a picture was emerging and I had run out of energy for this mode of research. My countertransference towards my pool of respondents began to mirror the frequently depressing content of the replies received. On the other hand five (if I include myself) out of the twenty -seven were able to say 'yes' to the key question of whether or not you currently run a weekly ongoing group for the general public; and five who said 'no' were nonetheless fired up by the question and engaged with me in animated discussion of the whys and wherefores, and I am grateful to them in particular for the amplification of this section of my article.

WHO IS AFRAID?

Groupwork also seems to have been tainted for some by allegations of 'hidden depths' awaiting the naive facilitator and/or naive member of the public. Indeed deep work happens in groups (more on this later) and difficulties here are par for the course, the position taken by Morris Nitsun in his revision of group analysis. But this kind of knowing shaking of heads suggests this is more of a problem for psychotherapists than members of the public. The punters anyway can mostly vote with their feet, assuming they haven't been disempowered, partly through lack of information from the same caring professionals claiming to protect them. There isn't space to detail here how developments over the last ten years in the politics of psychotherapy have negatively impacted on the range, quality and nature of personal development work available through groups for the general public. For relevant critiques of the reactionary aspects of the

therapeutic field see Mowbray, House and Totton, and Postle.

ONE TO ONE COMPARISON

What is possible in a group that is not possible in individual sessions? The content or raw material brought to both may hardly differ i.e, feelings(emotions, moods and sensations), thoughts, behaviours, memories, images, impulses, intuitions, values, meanings and so on. What differs is what happens with more or less all of these forms of experience when brought into a room with perhaps ten to sixteen people also bringing theirs. All at once there is a massive potential for relatedness, for an intensive appreciation of one's own and others' worlds. Now this is simply too much for some individuals at certain times in their lives or for much of their lives. But for most people, such a bonanza gathering up of experience is a project with promise. Given that groups occupy a position somewhere in between the privacy and containment of the individual session and the relative anonymity and boundarilessness of public places (streets, stores, restaurants, transport and other public amenities that just about anybody can enter at any time), then the group is a unique combination of safety (through its ground rules and working contract) and excitement (through the unpredictability of others).

COMPLEX FIELD

As facilitator of the group, I too am infused with this unpredictability and compared with individual sessions much more of me will be visible; by virtue of the varieties of relating I am challenged to engage in, by upwards of ten different pairs of eyes, ears, hands, feet and all the body in between.

For example one single moment of group process will often be experienced in astonishingly different ways by all present and as these experiencings are revealed, spoken and related, so still further interpretations become possible by group members and myself. In the truly experiential group meanings in the plural are discovered rather than the meaning in the singular being assigned and delivered to participants as typically happens in seminar groups and teachings.

Some people however do not thrive in this area of autonomy and diversity. Like double cream it is too rich, they could choke on it. Even then there is useful learning in the short term through being able to recognise the threshold at which one cuts out, ceases experiencing, falls asleep or evidences other signs of resistance to being alive and feeling one's own and others' feelings. So in a group almost everything is grist for the mill. If every expression evokes an impression elsewhere in the group then the chemistry of the encounter between any two group members, with the varying levels of participation of the others present, can, over time, move the interaction of the whole group to the level of 'alchemy' (the art of transmuting base metals into gold metaphorically speaking).

TYPES OF GROUPS

Groupwork can be categorised according to whether the group offers individual work with the group leader in a group setting or members working with each other with the leader facilitating this endeavour, or a focus on the group as a whole by the group leader. These are not necessarily exclusive categories and the percentage of each dimension in any given group will tend to fluctuate.

—aking my own groupwork at The Open Centre as an example, in the order referred to above, my ongoing groupwork features roughly a 30/50/20 mix whereas with weekend groups the mix is more like 60/30/10.

My theme workshops, attended by participants in both the above forms, differ from ongoing and weekend groups in following a predetermined structure rather than process and its promptings. There is no element of individual work with myself as the group leader nor do I focus on the group as a whole. Instead I provide a series of structured exercises which focus participants on the workshop's theme (60%). I also give information, an educative element (20%). Along the way there will be an element of group members working with each other (20%). It is as well to know which mix you are looking for but this is usually only clarified by actually attending some groups!

SPECIAL POTENTIALS

Individual sessions can probably never quite do justice to the social nature of human beings. There is of course a great deal else they can do. Whereas the dyad of practitioner and single client tends to re-present the earliest mother-child relationship, the triad of the (minimal) group of three tends to introduce themes connected with father, family and society beyond. At this more oedipal level more conflicts can be sustained and worked through, the group functioning as a series of triads, checking the mergers of dyads, fostering differentiation, an inherent feature of maturity. This series of triads also ensures the representation of more than one helping viewpoint, thus curbing excessive dependency on authority

(the group leader), modelling the potentials of 'power with' rather than 'power over'.

In the absence of organic communities, many of the 'natural' or traditional groupings that are intermediate between the isolated individual and mass society e.g. families, church, political parties, fail to perform therapeutic functions for their members in terms of interpersonal relatedness.

Further, a group always has a potential for evolving significant rituals for its members. Humans have a need to create from below rituals that reflect the meanings of their relatedness, opposing their alienation. Not surprisingly, the imposition of a ritual space from above is experienced as alien e.g. sufficient numbers of the public stayed away from the Millennium Dome and sealed its fate. And finally, for many people groups longer term are economically more accessible than individual work.

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

In the 21st Century new questions are facing psychotherapists, whether they like it or not. For example, while like many people practitioners may just wish away the ever growing tide of junk transmissions through a range of media, not to mention the incalculable passage of mobile phone signals through metropolitan brains ('passive phoning'), the question remains how are unwanted surplus communications affecting the psychic health and economies of groups and individuals. Perhaps therapists could contribute to the creation of new forms of social immunity, helping people proof themselves against the invasive and debilitating aspects of contemporary

culture. Maybe certain emotions call for more socially aware interpretation; for example, aggressive disgust may be an appropriate response to the presumptions and liberty - taking of the so-called free market. Maybe it is time for groups to once again be recognised as a site of consciousness raising. Psychotherapeutic preoccupations with confidentiality are merely quaint to those who are now making it their business to get inside as many heads and bodies as possible, in order to build up a picture of the most intimate details of household functioning (so-called private life) though the computerised information gathering of digital television sets, systematically monitoring the choices each viewer is making (see 'The Privacy Issue').

In a time like this group members may be heartened to hear from their fellows of the potentials of spoiling and subverting, and ways of arriving at inducement immunity. Psychotherapists can both learn from and contribute to the emerging seeds of social resistance, some of which will have mass movement properties. This chimes in with Andrew Samuels' conception of the citizen as therapist to society. Groups are mini-societies in which such notions can be actualised, providing the therapist is listening with what John Rowan has termed 'The Fourth Ear'. Without falling into either concrete or paranoid thinking a socially aware group conductor will ask himself: where do I position myself on the issue in question, the societal issue being represented within the group. A socially aware client/group member will know that neutrality is not really an option and will likely divine pretensions thereto as phoney.

ALIENATION

The considerations just enumerated suggest that there is more than a personal unconscious to be worked through in groups. Estrangement of people from themselves and each other proceeds apace under the unreal canopy of millennial public relations and wealth creation. More than 150 years ago Karl Marx analysed alienation, identifying the fundamental antagonisms between free market forces and human relatedness. The same fragmentation of collectivity reappears in the difficulties groups experience in working collectively. Twenty-eight years ago Jerome Liss, one of the early exponents in Britain of Humanistic Psychology within groupwork published 'Free to Feel'. Groups at The Open Centre, founded three years later in 1977, have their roots in the shift of consciousness described therein, whereby groupwork became more than a normalising process with an essentially adaptive agenda and came to be about people's potentials, whole people, bodyminds - there are no patients in treatment at The Open Centre.

Aside perhaps from hermits and some mystics most people will tend to inhabit one or more social worlds. Like Janus, Roman god of the doorway and the first month of our calendar year, groupwork faces both inwards and outwards, situated more midway between the psyche and the social than private (or privy-closeted) psychotherapy can ever be. Whereas in individual therapeutic work my role is akin to that of the prostitute, i.e. taking the place of another in a partial intimacy, in groupwork it is a more dual role: on the one hand like a janitor I

manage a boundary; on the other hand like a catalyst (a third substance, the presence of which alters the interaction of the other substances) I have the task of animating.

ANIMATION

Animating? Isn't that what cartoonists do? Yes, in the restricted connotations of the term's English usage. While that at least honours the idea that this is not an occupation that should take itself too seriously (as psychotherapists for example are prone to) it misses the mark as to what animation really means. On the continent a group leader is commonly referred to as an 'animateur'. For myself, as a practitioner of bioenergetics and psychodrama, this is the term which best gives the flavour of my own style of groupwork. Someone who brings to life, who if not formally spiritual, is at least both spirited and spiring, aiming to combine in practitionership elements of an art form and a political act. Groupwork can then extend beyond its healing and wholing assignments to become a theatre of activism for social change, a rehearsal space that is fun and exciting as well as painful and testing, all the while preparing the players for serious changes out there. I am indebted, amongst others, to Augusto Boal as a mentor in this shift of perspective. Practitioners today are in need of inspiration to rework and renovate essential elements in the practice of Humanistic Psychology, especially through forms of groupwork that can contribute to a renewed, wider and more countercultural Human Potential Movement.

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