



Reconnecting With Ourselves Through Group Process

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The prevalence of poor, ineffectual communication and dysfunctional relationships in our society is all too obvious and lies behind many of the social and emotional problems that blight the lives of young and old alike. The seeds of this malaise lie, according to Yalom, in the first group to which we are exposed, that of our family, and for many whose family has been dysfunctional the need for a corrective group experience may be acute.

This has been true of my own life, as my early family experiences led me to develop a highly negative and self defeating perception of myself and my place in the world. I lost my mother at the age of six to cancer, and was subsequently in the care of my father who had been deeply wounded by his own childhood. He had a strong need for control and the enforcement of total obedience, which he did through intimidation and explosions of anger. In this context I was perpetually fearful, and with no other source of support I was unable to learn to develop boundaries or a familiarity with my own needs and feelings. This left me poorly adjusted to progress through the developmental stages of childhood and adolescence.

According to Hughes a healthy and secure sense of self, which is developed through secure attachment, is likely to lead to good communication skills and healthy relationships, which automatically 'reinforce' the process of emotional development. Conversely an unhealthy and insecure sense of self is likely to lead to poor communication skills and an impoverished degree of emotional development. Naturally the difference between the two manifests in innumerable contrasts in personality and behaviour, leading to far reaching and usually life long effects on life choices and experience.

In my own case this has been reflected in the fact that although I attained a degree level education, I subsequently spent

a long period doing unskilled work in an emotionally unhealthy environment. I simply did not have a sufficiently positive concept of myself to avoid the debilitating levels of anxiety I experienced when attempting to perform roles of responsibility and status for which I felt unworthy and incapable. Predictably working in an unskilled environment presented its own problems, most notably in my vulnerability to bullying by work colleagues. The obedient, defenceless compliance that made me acceptable to my father proved to be a highly dysfunctional coping strategy in adult life.

During the various groups I attended, I discovered that the contrasting nature of the social and emotional conditioning of the constituent members of a group is a rich resource through which members can gain awareness and understanding of their patterns of behaviour and how they impact on their ability to form satisfying relationships. When dysfunctional aspects of behaviour are identified and understood, an individual then has the opportunity to experiment with different ways of 'being' in a supportive and non judgemental environment.

'Most psychiatric patients have an impoverished group history; never before have they been a valuable, integral, participating member of a group. For these patients the sheer successful negotiation of a group experience may in itself be curative.' (Yalom)

Yalom also quotes Kapp et al, whose research led them to conclude that 'self perceived personality change correlates significantly with both the members'

feeling of involvement in the group and with ... group cohesiveness'.

Navigating a path through the assortment of highly individual defence mechanisms of a group in a way that enables participants to be more open and authentic with each other is a tricky process, and requires considerable skill and experience on the part of the facilitator. These defences can ordinarily inhibit clear and clean communication, and in group situations there is often a lack of awareness of the variety of perspectives present and the unique, personal nature of their origin. These perspectives and agendas are predominantly self-protecting, self-justifying and unconscious, and even when brought to awareness are not easily sacrificed in the development of closer relationships or a greater depth of understanding. They have after all been born out of coping strategies in childhood, and there may be considerable attachment to strategies that are not only familiar but which have also provided a vital sense of safety and security in times of acute vulnerability, however dysfunctional that might have been.

In my experience, when connections and relationships in groups resonate strongly with an individual's early family environment, powerful healing opportunities can arise in which aspects of the function and consequences of the defensive strategies evoked can be clearly revealed. Such instances are often characterised by the strength of the feelings aroused being out of proportion to the 'here and now'. In addition they may also be accompanied by a reluctance of the individual to own the disparity of

feeling, as there may at some level be a vague awareness that to do so would risk experiencing the pain of the original relationship or situation which the coping mechanism has hitherto sought to keep from consciousness.

For me this is a critical point in the therapeutic function of groups, for no matter how skilled the facilitator or how supportive the other constituent members of the group, there has to be both a willingness and an ability on the part of any given individual to be open to the possible engulfment of difficult and at times painful feelings, in order to benefit fully from the healing potential of the moment. Without these, the priceless opportunity to risk letting go of and moving beyond the 'coping façade' can be lost, and with that the opportunity for the incremental change, however small, of the emotional process of the group member.

Having spent a long time trying to 'find my feelings', I bizarrely perhaps adopted the somewhat masochistic approach of seeking opportunities to have them evoked by others. On the most significant occasions when this occurred it has always involved an 'uncontrolled' emotional release, followed some time later by a fresh sense of self awareness and understanding. For me the willingness to let go to intense unknown and unsettling feelings is a key step in self development; one which can be extremely difficult to take when every unconscious 'impulse' is to avoid and suppress the process.

In my experience the development of self awareness can therefore be painful and at times bewildering, and this may cause many people

to avoid doing the very things that would ultimately bring them greater fulfilment and intimacy in their relationships. There is a plethora of unconscious processes at work which combine and overlap in subtle and complex ways, making clarity and understanding difficult to attain. Given the relatively low levels of emotional consciousness in our culture, it follows that a significant amount of the communication between members of any group will very likely be unconscious, and the potential for misunderstandings and conflict is considerable. Inevitably the contents of the unconscious are not immediately accessible and we are therefore left to attempt to observe and interpret unconscious processes as they are revealed by interpersonal perceptual distortions that interfere with communication.

According to Yalom, the unconscious processes underlying group dynamics are many and varied, including regression, dissociation, denial, projection, displacement, identification, transference and suppression. The greater the degree to which these unconscious processes can be brought to awareness, the greater is the opportunity for members to integrate denied or dissociated aspects of themselves and to facilitate emotional growth.

I have personally experienced groups in a variety of contexts at Atlow Mill including adult support groups, weekend workshops and an ongoing psychodrama group. Perhaps the most significant group experience for me at Atlow to date however has been the year long post graduate course in emotional education (PGCEE). A group of twelve shared the experience of studying contemporary theory and

practice relating to emotional literacy and emotional education. This took place within the context of nine residential weekends, ending with the presentation of a three day course to the public. The theoretical content of the course effectively acted as the vehicle through which personal emotional development was encouraged and facilitated, so that 'personal growth' was not so much an incidental bonus of the learning but more a central goal and objective of it. There was a strong, continuous emphasis throughout on personal reflection and consideration of one's own attitudes, feelings and perceptions, and as the course developed over the months the opportunity was there for the review and integration of both theoretical and experiential material. The aspect of the passage of time in itself helped to deepen the quality of the learning and support the continuation of the process of growth.

It was very much a shared experience, and the relationships that developed became a part of the learning experience as well as being sources of camaraderie and support. All of us inevitably reflected back to each other aspects of our own behaviour and thought processes, just by the very act of being together. As the levels of trust deepened so did the levels of sharing and the quality of intimacy between group members. Where tensions and / or animosity did develop they could be interpreted and addressed within the context of having awareness of the emotional agendas behind them, which usually simply led to a deeper quality of compassion and understanding.

My most poignant group experience came in the form of mirroring the defence mechanism of another group member, and the resultant enmeshment issues that ensued. Having an absence of a safe and secure attachment relationship in childhood, I coped with this predicament by suppressing my pain and fear and 'pretending' to be okay in order to be able to function in relationships. By the time I reached adulthood there was a considerable gap between the way I felt inside, and the way I tried to appear in order to cope with daily life. I experienced my frightened child within as a debilitating companion who could only be revealed in a context of complete safety. The PGCEE course represented just such a context and it did not take long before my frightened child was able to recognise the counterpart of another within our group. The recognition was predictably reciprocated and I was quickly identified as a fellow 'kid' to befriend in order to provide feelings of safety and connectedness.

The other group member concerned was largely unconscious of the nature of their emotional predicament, and I rapidly began to experience myself as being pressured to respond from my 'child state'. Having an under developed capacity to resist this pressure or to set boundaries, I wrestled with the dilemma of not wanting to hurt the other individual whilst simultaneously feeling trapped in my own dysfunctional coping mechanism. In empathising with the pain of the frightened child within them from the experience of my own I sought to avoid

rejecting their child at all costs. When after some period of time I did eventually voice my concerns about our relationship the other person was intensely angry, confused and upset.

Although a complete 'resolution' of this situation was never achieved during the duration of the course, it was nevertheless a highly significant and illuminating experience for us both, and one which offered the prospect of considerable future learning and healing. For me it highlighted in glorious Technicolor how my coping strategies in that context were dysfunctional and ultimately unsustainable, and I find it difficult to see how the intensity of that learning experience could have been gained in any way other than in a group context.

In my opinion the capacity of groups to trigger situations such as this is the essence of their potency and effectiveness in revealing behavioural strategies

which consciously or unconsciously keep us apart. Therapeutic groups can provide an excellent social microcosm in which to begin to repair or replace some of the lost social and emotional training of childhood, and while they can be intense and unpredictable, under skilful leadership they can facilitate powerful healing which may not be possible in any other context. Through enduring the uncomfortable mirroring of dysfunctional behaviours, groups can help us to reclaim many of those aspects of our inner beauty that have long been hidden behind defensive masks and walls - aspects which we may have either long since forgotten or which we may never have even dreamt could be ours to own. Given the chronic need for the rediscovery and reintegration of these inner qualities, it can only be hoped that such groups become a great deal more accessible in our society, to the point that they become a routine, mainstream experience.

References

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