

Reflections on Three Presentations on the Theme of 'How Applied Group Analysis Could Help People to Develop Professional Capacities'

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In response to: Ana Luisa Lopes de Carvalho Teixeira (Coaching based on Group Analytic Methodology) Christine Thornton (The Hall of Mirrors: Key Themes from a Group of Community Development Workers) Jose Pedro Pontes (Using the Balint Group as a Learning Tool in Economic Education).

It is by adapting, modifying and judicially bending the rules that innovative practices and new approaches are developed, and that new ways of achieving specific objectives are found. The use of group analytic understanding in finding ways of addressing the problems people face in contemporary society, requires a great deal of enthusiasm, dedication and hard work. In these three presentations it involved identifying an area of study, applying group analytic methodology combined with other approaches to a particular project, collecting data, evaluating outcomes and presenting those outcomes to colleagues and employing bodies.

When examining the theoretical background used in these projects, the concept of '*holding*' is often used, a Winnicott concept that is well explained by all the presenters. I would like to compare it with the term '*containing*', a term used by Alfred Bion to describe the function of the mother in the early mother–infant relationship.

He described the process of ‘container–contained’ that takes place in most human relationships.

Both concepts are helpful when thinking about groups; ‘holding’ is concerned with ‘being’, (with reality, with existence) on how the mother ‘feels herself’ into the baby’s place, ‘enters’ into the baby’s sense of time until the baby is ready to come together as a separate ‘self’ (Ogden, 2004). As Christine Thornton has explained, the group conductor initially welcomes each individual into the group and is sensitive to their individual needs, to how each individual is and fits into the group.

Bion’s concept of ‘container–contained’ is concerned with the processing of thoughts derived from lived emotional experience. It involves doing conscious and unconscious psychological work on emotional experience and results in psychic growth, that is, it increases the individual’s capacity to think and to feel. The mother accepts the baby’s preverbal unprocessed thoughts and anxious feelings (Beta elements), communicated, projected into her through projective identification, and returns them to him/her, digested, in a form that is acceptable (Alpha elements). This is described as the Alpha Function (James, 1984: 209).

The group awakens in the individual primitive anxieties, conflicting emotions can tear the group apart, and can result in psychological withdrawal. The group conductor needs to be aware of this, of the impact of the emotional material brought by the group members to the group, so it does not overwhelm them.

The first *task of the group conductor* is to enable its members to develop a sense of belonging to the group ‘in group work, identification and maintenance of boundaries determines the identity of the group’ (Ormay, 2012: 145). A member of Christine Thornton’s group asked a question about her experience of anxiety or boredom. Using her words, the group conductor has to help the group to navigate the space between ‘anxiety and boredom’ or the other way around ‘boredom and anxiety’, to find psychic equilibrium and get on with the agreed task.

We could speculate that in the group, both psychological states (boredom and anxiety) can be either useful or catastrophic. Too much anxiety can result in ‘acting out’ behaviour or becoming paralysed, unable to function, slowing down the group progress. While the right amount of anxiety can be stimulating, can help the group become alert and creative.

Boredom can result in a withdrawal of energy, in an unconscious refusal to see the value and potential in the task that the group has to engage in, and can lead to disillusionment. But, if acknowledged and verbalized, it can also lead to action, to feeling driven to shake off the lethargy and to find ways of performing the task.

Both '*holding*' and 'containing-contained' are dynamic concepts; 'holding' requires the dedicated attention of the conductor who has to be both passive, letting the group do the work, but also receptive-active, actively observing and trying to understand what the group is trying to communicate, in terms of what are the group's conscious and unconscious needs at the time?

In all three presentations, 'holding' was achieved through the implementation of a clear set of rules to be followed by the group, the regularity and consistency of the group meetings, as well as the dedication and attentiveness of the group facilitators. This created a feeling of safety and trust that sustained the groups.

Container-contained necessitates that the group conductor becomes aware of conscious and unconscious processes. In order to do so, the group needs to be allowed to free-associate (Foulkes names it as 'free floating discussion') (James, 1984: 212), what I would also think of as playing, or daydreaming together. The group conductor then needs to facilitate the thinking together, reflecting on what has been said, processing the often confused and contradicting thoughts and emotions that have been stirred up in the group.

This is easier in long term groups but in time limited groups it is more difficult and it could be considered a luxury to let group members 'play' but we must take into account that 'We must take into account the significance of the ability to play, 'playing implies trust' (Winnicott, 1971: 51) and the importance of communicating through play in a group, as indicative of a sense of self capable of relating to other selves. In these presentations it was clear that the conductors were well aware of the needs of their groups. They allowed, with some reasonable limitations, an expression of the feelings and thoughts that the group members needed to explore.

I found Ana Luisa Teixeira's project, using coaching techniques and group analytic principles of particular interest. Her and her team's insight into the unexpressed and unacknowledged unconscious needs of day hospital patients who were coming to the stage of leaving the hospital and finding employment and who had signed up for a coaching course, enabled them to plan this particular group.

Applying coaching principles meant that they needed to set up clear limits. The members of the group could discuss any subject they wanted to, within a set programme and structure. By their careful use of language (*coaching, not therapy*) and by creatively working across agencies (that is with other professionals at the day hospital), they were able to put across this message to the group members. The emphasis was on learning, on finding results and solutions. However, as both coaching and group analytic principles were adhered to, group therapeutic factors emerged. 'Exchange' (Foulkes, 1986: 34) enabled new learning through communication and insight, leading to psychic growth, for all the members of the group, including the conductor.

These concepts make me think of the *importance of the group conductor, group analyst, coach, facilitator, leader . . .* In these presentations, they had to perform all of these roles in their groups. This could not have been easy. In Pedro Pontes' project, the dynamic administration extended to: setting up the group, booking the room, advertising it, approaching his colleagues to invite them to join, explaining the method, setting the goals, sending reminders, keeping the boundaries, and also, presenting his research work to his faculty.

The transference/countertransference is present more or less powerfully, and whether we work with it or not, in all groups. I think it is most clearly observable in Pedro Pontes presentation (Pontes, 2015). Pedro, after thoroughly researching the Balint group method, adapted it to help a group, composed mostly of economics college professors, with their work.

By allowing the group to make decisions in some aspects of the group structure, I think he became for them a helpful and benevolent leader. *I would say he took on the function of an enabling superego; firm, disciplined, but not harsh or persecutory.* He provided 'holding' by implementing the rules within the group. Soon the group members felt that they could trust him and each other and the group started to work on the agreed programme. The observation that the group members behaved in a 'nice' and 'polite' manner towards each other, and I presume towards the group leader, points to some underlying anxiety in the group, about competition and sibling rivalry. In the 'final revision' stage, when members were encouraged to share their views in an open way, they said that this 'enabled them to learn and feel good', and I think that demonstrates that they felt they were accepted within the group, they belonged and were beginning to be able to take risks in sharing their thoughts with their colleagues in the group.

Subsequent events brought to the surface the extent, in reality, of their vulnerability and the intense competition existing at the university. The safe space that the group had created was compromised and primitive anxieties and fears were intensified, not only in the two members who had suffered narcissistic wounds and feelings of shame and anger but, I think, in all the group members. Basic assumption group defence positions of fight–flight, pairing, dependency and the fourth basic assumption incohesion in the form of aggregation (Hopper, 2003: 72), were manifested in the group.

This development could bring us to consider negative processes in groups, (anti-group phenomenon, Nitsun, 1996) as a result of unbearable feelings of envy, sibling rivalry and also group defensive processes (idealization, emulation, basic assumptions). These, if acknowledged and verbalized, can help individuals get in touch with repressed emotions, which in turn can deepen understanding in the group.

We saw this taking place in Christine Thornton's group, when she helped Blubber/Hippo in a gentle and subtle way to acknowledge her neediness and how this in turn, enabled Hippo to use her own experience and insight, in her own coaching work, to help others.

The group conductor as *role model* is evident in Christine Thornton's presentation, in that her group members clearly internalized her way of facilitating the group and they followed her example.

All three projects are commendable because they are focused on finding solutions to very real problems:

- Ana Luisa Teixeira's addressing our society's problem of helping mentally ill people to find employment. The outcome of her project resulting in some of them gaining confidence, self-esteem and hopefully finding employment leading to an improvement in their socioeconomic situation is encouraging.
- Pedro Pontes focusing on the difficulties that university professors face linked to their university's reward system fostering competition instead of cooperation, resulting in feelings of individual insecurity, mistrust and divisions amongst staff.
- Christine Thornton's application of group analytic concepts, informed by Winnicott's theories on child emotional development, in her 'action learning set', training community development workers to run 'action learning sets' for patients.

The task that they set for themselves; to bring together elements of at least two different theoretical models to develop something new, is fraught with complications. They did so with integrity, using what was relevant to their task, being pragmatic but also allowing room for creativity.

It is also important to remind ourselves of the backdrop, the context, in which these projects have taken place, that is, the present socioeconomic and political pressures that all professionals are having to work under.

By researching and documenting the outcome of these projects, they have inhabited the current world of 'outcome measures' and 'evidence based practice', an essential requirement for professionals working in the public sector, and becoming increasingly necessary for all mental health practitioners and organizational consultants. These presentations show the ingenuity and creativity necessary to conceive, plan and carry out these type of projects and have also shown us that it is possible to meet these demands without compromising the work.

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