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What is a good and enjoyable group?

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Introduction

Is there such thing as a good and enjoyable group? The answer is: “No”. But there are enjoyable and good, transforming moments in group analytic processes. One example: in my last group session, yesterday evening, after a long silence a woman started to tell the group that for the first time she could close her eyes during the silence: “A very good feeling”, she said.” I developed a bit of trust in the group.” Later on she reported very destructive fantasies to be raped, beaten up etc. when she has sex with her boyfriend. I just thought, this is her way to transform her traumatizing experiences when she was raped by her father and her elder brother into sexual desire. If these developments can take place in a group I enjoy the group process.

If we define group analysis as the analysis of the group by the group it remains a question what do we need the group analyst for? In one of the last sessions before a holiday break, one patient asked me: „Where do you go for your holiday?” Immediately another group member responded: „You don’t need to ask him, he never answers any question!“ A third one resonated: „What do we need him for? In our discussions after the group sessions we are much more relaxed. Couldn’t we much better discuss our problems with our team? “ After a short pause another group member said: „We wouldn’t exist without him.“ Any ,however, unique group conducted by a group analyst exists in this specific form through the composition of the group analyst. This confronts us with the paradox: The group needs its conductor in order to exist, but the group members, including the conductor, find new solutions for their conflicts by their free-floating communication and develop thus trust into the group. How does this trust into the capacity of the group analytic process: to find creative solutions to communicated conflicts- develop? What makes the group therapeutic? What do they need the conductor for and which way of conducting supports such therapeutic development? Does a group process develop differently dependant on the theoretical and technical background of the conductor?

The group analytic process as the therapeutic agent

Whenever a group analyst works with a group, the group becomes the therapeutic agent under the condition that the conductor introduces into the group analytic situation his group analytic

attitude and the group slowly identifies with it. This slow process needs time, therefore, all groupanalytic groups – it does not matter in which social context or with which aim or task they work – need time to develop trust into the groupanalytic attitude. The conductor invites all members to speak freely and to bring up anything which enters their minds. „All communications are treated alike and with equal respect, even the smallest and most trivial remarks.“ (cf S.H. Foulkes 1948, p. 72) Resistance is understood as all circumstances which interfere with the free expression of all phantasies and feelings etc. The psychopathology of the individual members which they individually perceive as their symptoms develop as resistances towards free-floating communication in a groupanalytic situation and are analysed by the whole group. ??? The primary psychological unit is the matrix of the group, the primary biological unit is the individual. All communications by the group become unconscious interpretations of mostly unconscious group conflicts. Each individual member brings into this situation his or her internalised group experiences which become mostly unconscious during their development.

„In learning to communication the group can be compared with a child learning to speak.“ (S.H. Foulkes, E.J. Anthony 1968, p. 263).

How does the group get access to unconscious meanings?

A groupanalytic attitude is a technique which opens an intermediate space in which unconscious processes within and between groups can become conscious. In a long process of training the conductor has learned to relate to the group and to each individual in the group in a groupanalytic way. The groupanalytic attitude frustrates all regressive dependency needs of the group. In the beginning of the group process they are looking for a godlike leader. These strong needs for dependency and power which are the opposite of reciprocity between equals are a risk to the free-floating communication and can deteriorate the process in two ways: Firstly, autonomy can develop into arbitrariness. Secondly, the group can become split between a godlike leader and a mass of merged individual members. All differences within the group are denied. The main task of the conductor in such a situation is according to Foulkes: „To wean the group from it’s need for authoritative guidance...“ (S.H. Foulkes 1964, p. 61). This is one reason why Foulkes called the group analyst: conductor and not leader.

In the second session of a training group one member protested that she is missing a leader in the group and does not want to continue such group without a leader. This member could not join into a groupanalytic situation in which the „leader’s authority is replaced by that of the group“ (S.H. Foulkes 1948, p. 61). But not only the authority of the conductor gets replaced

but also the trust: In the beginning of the groupanalytic process group members are looking for a leader whom they could trust. By adopting the groupanalytic attitude this trust into the leader gets replaced by the trust into the group. Resistances in the groupanalytic process can be understood as attacks onto the trust into the group and onto the trust of the conductor into the groupanalytic attitude. If these resistances become very strong the conductor has to become very active by interpreting the unconscious meanings. But how do we get access to the unconscious meanings?

One question of many patients before starting the group process: why should other patients be able to help me? In his basic law of group analysis, Foulkes defined the deepest reason why patients can reinforce the therapeutic process: „Because they collectively constitute the very norm from which they individually deviate“ (S.H. Foulkes 1948, p. 29). Despite these anxieties patients or teams join a groupanalytic process because they want to belong to a significant group and to understand their own problems with communicating in a group. The frustration of the wish to get interpreted by the group analyst provokes very strong anxieties, aggressions, splitting processes etc. But in a free-floating communication the differences in perceiving this frustrating situation can become conscious. This can lead to a very painful slow process accompanied by very destructive fantasies to enjoy the otherness of the others as a great resource for ones own development. The main resistance towards listening is xenophobia, the anxiety of a different view of the world. A well developing groupanalytic process can be seen as a communication process, „in which competing discourses come into conflict with the aim to free each group member from being stuck in ones own discourse, ones own experience of the self and the world, and opens up the possibility of connecting with other discourses, other ways of being and experiencing which one did not have previously access to“ (F. Dalal 1998, p. 177).

Mirroring processes and resonance

Mirroring and resonance open the way to the unconscious meaning of what is said. By mirroring we combine empathy with the other and the perception of the difference from the other in one affective resonance to the perception of the otherness of the other, each group member tells more than he or she says. Like in a mirror with which we could see our back we can get access to the unconscious meaning by mirroring processes and by the resonance of other group members to the unconscious meaning of our communications. The group plays with meanings in Winnicott's sense. Before reaching this level of communication in a free-

floating association in which the group plays with metaphors and meanings, the group has to work through dependency needs, destructive hate and splitting processes.

I give you an example. In a group session one member described like many times before his obsessional rituals. Another group member shouted at him: „Stop! We have heard it so many times. Stop it or leave the room, I can't stand it anymore!“ The attacked group member responded: „If you talk like this you should leave the group.“ I only commented that each position has a room in this group.

The mirroring group member opens through his attack an exchange over the obsessional resistance towards a free-floating communication. The fantasy to exclude one of the members, a very destructive fantasy, opens up a process of differentiating: both ways of seeing the situation have a room in the group. The group followed by starting to work on the destructive fantasies involved by differentiating from each other. I can't go into more detail why destructive fantasies play such an important role in this process of differentiation.

What does the group need the group analyst for?

In order to trust the groupanalytic attitude, the group conductor has to go through a long way of training in which his or her own group analysis is of vital importance. I wanted to become a group analyst because group analysis was connected to the hope to develop a democratic group culture: the free communication between equals. When I started my training I looked for a Jewish emigrant residing in London with the hope that I could work through with her as a group conductor my shame and guilt as a German which was, despite the fact that I was born in 1946 in a non-Nazi family, deeply connected to the Nazi cruelties in German history. When the staff of IGA Warszawa asked me as a German to conduct their training groupanalysis I wondered why you asked me as a German, a member of this group who did many cruelties to Polish families. It could have been a similar hope to work through with the German group conductor the cruel experiences with Germans in your own families' histories. This means each conductor has to take into consideration the historical, political and social background in which the groupanalytic process takes place. Only the openness to take into consideration the whole situation opens the way to unconscious meanings of the group communication. But the conductor has to do other so-called dynamic administrative tasks: He tries to compose a group with the principle of maximal heterogeneity and similar capacities to tolerate frustrations. A good preparation of each group member to the group process by the conductor reduces the drop-out rate tremendously (see Knauss 2005). In preparing each group member for the groupanalytic process the conductor explains in every detail the

importance of respectful exchange between equals, of absolute discretion, the meaning of free group association and the rule that each relationship outside the group must be brought into the group. In his or her own group analysis the trainee has to work through his or her anxieties towards groups, his or her own internalised experiences with groups in his or her biography and his or her dependency needs on group leaders.

For establishing a democratic process between group trainings, the European Groupanalytic Training Institutions Network (EGATIN) was formed by Yannis Tsegos and myself after a conference in Zagreb in 1984. This tries to reduce the dependency towards mother institutions of group analysis in London and to open up a discussion between equals on standards in training. It allows to discuss ones own view of a good enough training and to confront it with other standards from other institutes in a free-floating discussion between equals. One precondition to talk freely in ones training group is a non-reporting system in the institute, which means that nothing from the groupanalytic process of trainees gets into administrative contexts. Nevertheless, it remains a question if it is really the group who develops the process and not the conductor only. In a study by Strauss and Kirchmann (2004) different group conductors and different groups conducted by the same group analyst were compared. The results show that the differences between different group conductors and the differences between different groups of the same conductor were equal. This means that the unique groupanalytic process of a unique group differs from the process in another group conducted by the same conductor as much as groups conducted by different conductors. The influence on the group process by the group and the conductor are equal.

One groupanalytic attitude for different groups

I work not only in groupanalytic psychotherapy with patients but also with team supervision in hospitals, with research groups with high school students in Papua New Guinea and in a transcultural setting of German and French participants coming from a German-French marriage and with homogeneous groups of alcoholics as well as with Balint groups. The groupanalytic attitude remains the same. The creativity and dynamic administration of the conductor is somewhat different. In the German Association for group analysts the basic qualification for being accepted for example as a group analytic team supervisor or Balint group conductor is to be qualified as a group analyst with some specific qualifications added. For example, a Balint group conductor, who works groupanalytically in addition to his or her

groupanalytic qualification, needs a supervision of the work with Balint groups and some theoretical seminars on Balint groups. The same applies to groupanalytic team supervisors. As group analysts with teams in hospitals we work in a hierarchically structured institution. I will give you an example. In a twice monthly supervision session all members of the team, nurses, music therapists, social workers, doctors, psychologist etc., attend. The doctor start the session by saying that the climate on the ward has changed negatively during the last months. There are tensions in the team which he cannot localise. Other team members tried to turn that statement down, and this was followed by a long silence. I interrupted the silence with the remark that I got the impression in the last sessions that the team gets split into nurses and doctors and psychologist. One nurse reported that the head nurse of the ward has written some very injuring remarks into the computer. Since then he decided to keep silent. Another nurse gives another example of being injured by the head nurse. Since then he does his work according to what is needed and not more. The discussion started on real dependencies inside the team, the differences between the different team members, the distribution of power, which was confronted with the ideology of the team that all should be equal, and the differences in the team are denied. This means all have the equal right to speak but not the equal right to decide. An open discussion could replace the tense silence. An important precondition is the independency of the conductor from the institution. In a research group which I conducted together with Susan Heenen-Wolff composed by French and German members coming from a mixed marriage (only one partner of the marriage was member of the group) we could observe how a groupanalytic process could get access to denied destructive fantasies in the German-French history. In one of the first sessions of this research group a French participant associated to the actual group situation the trains who brought Jewish citizens from France to Auschwitz. The group started with the discussion of the individual biography of the group members and how they were connected to Nazi cruelties in France and in Germany, influenced by the resistance and by collaboration. In a research group conducted by Hans Bosse and myself in Papua New Guinea with high school students the group could consciously discuss destructive processes which were part of the experiences of our group members between English culture in the school and the traditional culture in a headhunters bush village in the rainforest of Papua New Guinea. They were the first generation of the bush villages who went to school. The one who dropped out from the school were called the push-outs. They had to leave the school and ended up between both cultures by becoming rascals in one of the few cities. We could understand through the groupanalytic process that they were pushed out not only because they had not reached a good grade in school, but mainly because

they did not want to submit themselves to the rules of the Whites. These so-called push-outs couldn't go back to the village which would have been a big shame, they were pushed out from the school, from the white culture and ended up with criminal gangs in few cities of Papua New Guinea. In these sessions the connection between exclusion from their own and from the strange culture and a survival strategy which ended up in rage and self-destruction could become conscious. Only on the background of the whole group: the group of the Papuas and the group of the English staff of the school we could understand the destructive developments of so-called push-outs.

In so-called homogenous groups composed by same-symptom patients we work mainly in an institution. The groups can be homogenous according to their psychic structure, e.g. groups with addicted patients, according to their profession, e.g. groups with teachers, managers, nurses, or according to the biological criteria, e.g. working only with men, women or adolescents or according to their social situations, e.g. groups with only jobless participants or Turkish pupils or only groupanalytic trainees. At the IGA Heidelberg we accept all candidates who work with groups in whatever setting after a group and individual interview. In homogenous groups we have to take care of the homogenous resistance to structures, professional resistances or homogenous protective mechanisms, but the most dangerous resistance in homogenous groups could be the denial of differences within the group and to protect all differences towards other group which then become the enemies. Therefore, the conductor has to become very active whenever these resistances block the groupanalytic process. Gabor Szönyi and Jerzy Pawlik have described how political situations in Hungary and Poland during Marshall Law influenced their group processes in these historical and political contexts. The question, who is responsible for destructive group processes, remains as paradox as in the meeting of Picasso with a Nazi officer. The Nazi came into his studio where he was painting Guernica. The Nazi asked Picasso enraged: „Did you do this?“ Picasso's answer was: „No, you did it!“

Literatur

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