

DEVELOPMENTAL PHASES

PREREQUISITES FOR UNDERSTANDING

To understand group dynamics one has to see that a group is not a collection of individuals but an entity which is different to the sum of its parts. Using the word different as opposed to greater implies that a qualitative rather than a quantitative alteration in perspective is needed to understand a group. One can not talk about group dynamics until one can be freed from a focus on individuals. Most students will speak about the individuals in the group when giving an account of a session. Attention to the individual is natural enough, perhaps because we are individual and that is what we see in a mirror, or because our first attachment was to only one "other", or maybe because our society is so influenced by the cult of the individual. Lewin saw that individual behaviour is influenced by the group so that people behave not as discrete individuals but as parts of a group.

Theories of Developmental phases can be regarded as giving an overview of blocks or sequences of separate group dynamics. The theories organise and give meaning to the chains of dynamics, and obviously some theories will be found to be more relevant than others. Much of the following theory is based on the ideas of Agazarian and the notion of Seriality by Sartre.

Sartre's concept of Seriality is drawn from a picture of a number of people gathered around a Bus Stop. None have any meaning for one another except as objects, all are interchangeable with each other, and they are not what is meant by a group. This collection of individuals have to undergo a process together whereby they discover some reciprocal subjectivity in each other in order to become a group.

Agazarian's view is that there are two groups. A Visible one, understood in terms of what can be seen as the interactions taking place between the people in the group, contrasted with the Invisible group or Group as a Whole. This latter group is a theoretical construct of a group in which people no longer exist but are replaced with Ideas about a group and Ideas about people.

The Drifts

What I am suggesting here is a tendency inherent in a group, best imagined as a tide or current which will be pushing the group towards a particular direction.

1. Fairbairn states that man's most basic instinct is to be related. That it is only through relatedness and hence through relationships that the individual can acquire any sense of his own meaning. An infant on its own on a desert island would not know it was human, and that it is only through relationships that we acquire meaning for ourselves and the meaning of ourselves. The equivalent basic instinct of a group is to establish relatedness and that it should become a viable and secure group. When the group begins, Seriality is experienced as an anxious fragmentation, reproducing in its members feelings of disintegration and chaos, and this becomes an incentive for the group to move away from seriality and towards integration. It is the memory of that state of a "No group experience" which becomes imbued with an anxiety which propels the group in the opposite direction. In common with a bad dream, a group has some defence against the full impact of the anxieties it engenders, these defence being present in much of the material of the early sessions.

So the this drift sees the group moving away from the profound anxieties of the no-group and its feelings of isolation towards increased integration.

2. Like the emergent Freudian ego, a group moves from a structurally undifferentiated state of simplicity towards increasing maturity of function and structural complexity. Complexity increases the strength of the group which allows the modes of relating to become simpler and more direct as members' perceptions of each other are more real than transference based. There is a tendency for modes of relating to become more polymorphous and expressive.

One often finds that young groups have to refer back to earlier sessions and become involved in earnest debates over who said what to who and what was meant by what was said. The young group anxieties are high because they are mainly about being in the group, they also cause more distortion because members are more vulnerable to narcissistic slights.

3. The third tendency is for there to be a convergence between the latent, unconscious material and the manifest level of expression. This would not only follow on from 2. but also includes the phase of cohesion. The observable material offered in a young group, what it says about itself, its desires and feelings, are very often the opposite of what is experienced at a deeper level. The deeper level of feeling are too disturbing in that they stem from the no-group experience and relate to annihilation anxiety about the group. The stance of the conductor can amount to a no-leader experience and this stirs persecutory anxieties. Such strong and inaccessible feelings need strong defence. It can be argued that our best and earliest defence point outwards which links with findings about the high content of projective mechanisms in a new group. Think of a new group composed of people with a sophisticated understanding of psychotherapy. This group may deny its dependence on the leader to the extent that it ends up ignoring him, an obvious distance between manifest and latent levels.

When a group sits down for its first session it does not realise that this is a psycho-social event in which it will establish its own unique meaning. Its first confusion is that it believes that meaning is already in the group, has preceded them in some way and is lodged in the person of the conductor.

Under the influential pull of 1. and 2. the distance between manifest and latent contents is reduced and the levels tend towards a convergence.

* Oscillations

This is not really a trend but more of a frequent dynamic which Earl Hopper has proposed as an extension of Bion's Basic Assumptions. Seen in this context it becomes an other position a group finds itself in while it attempts to become a group, the work group being some kind of ideal. The dynamic is a continual swinging between Massification, a congealed merged state, and Aggregation, a distant separated state of individual isolation.

Casseguet-Smirgal sees the same trend to merge, as a counter-productive attempt to become a group motivated by a regressive wish to merge with the lost primary love object. Aggregation would then be characterised by feelings of being helpless, hopeless, impotent and abandoned.

The above ideas are based on a time of early individual development when the baby is at the threshold of moving from primary narcissism, make the first contrast (me / not me), and experience the anxiety of being a separate

individual. The oscillation is a swing from massification, a defensive regressed state attempting to merge with the breast, towards aggregation, being helpless and alone.

PHASES

Theories about phases divide in to two camps. Ones that hold that there is a linear progression from one phase to the next and those which regard the phases as being repeated in cycles. Bion's Basic Assumptions would be seen repetitive and therefore a cycle. A more recent model combines both two dimensional ones onto a three dimensional climbing spiral. The spiral allows one to speak of themes and phases being returned to but being dealt with in a different way which introduces the optimistic note that there can be a progression.

Group phases are often underpinned with a direct comparison to individual phases from various depth psychology theories. This would mean that an individual theoretical template is forced on top of the concept of a group and you would then view the new group as having an Oral or a Paranoid Schizoid orientation which would give way to an Anal or a Depressive one.

This is a tempting simplification but has the danger of trying to regard what is essentially two very different entities a group and an individual as the same, the basic social unit being two not one. Group developmental theory requires generalisations is about how a number of adults relate and form in to a group and that group's dynamics, it is a big step to compare this with the earliest phases of an individual child's development. We want the group theory because of the need for a map which charts the unconscious processes of a group but a map based on this premise would be as misleading as an A to Z in a jungle. An other risk of this view point is that the Conductor may give an interpretation from this level and speak of a paranoid schizoid mechanism which would confuse or frighten the group into silence. However because one of the impacts of the group is to produce anxiety leading to regression in its members one can employ the conceptual framework of individual psychic development to talk about what is going on in the individual members which then acts on the group dynamic.

I find it helpful to think of only four phases. There will be initial differences in the way development of patient groups and experiential groups, the former usually compare symptoms the latter are concerned about how to become a group. However both can be subsumed under a general search for orientation which then permits a theory which can be generally applicable to all groups even though the manifest content may be different.

The four phases are 1. Positive 2. Negative 3. Cohesion 4. Termination. Freud's own comparison with the progress of an analysis was to see it in terms of a chess game which has the Opening Moves and the End Games well documented and defined but in the Middle Game it's up to you, there are too many variables and you are on your own. I see this as also relevant to groups.

N.B.

And a slightly contentious point. A group can become stuck in a phase if left to itself. There is a requirement for the conductor to conduct, to make the correct Whole Group interpretation and act as a midwife delivering the group from one

phase to the next. Agazarian says that a group can fixate more than an individual because of the lack of external inputs which then touches on the functions of the conductor and his somewhat different objective overview. This idea is not necessarily at odds with the old maxim "trust the group" but it does place a limitation on it. Some groups can be trusted to flourish while other group's seem to show if not exactly the death wish of a sheep at least a serious failure to thrive which in turn seems cause in the conductor a worry about its viability.

A straight forward way for a conductor to approach this is to confine himself to making more Whole Group interpretations than individual ones in the early phases of a group's life. This does two things. One it tackles the issue that Whole Group tensions need to be interpreted before the individual concerns can really emerge, much of the Whole Group anxiety being focused on the person of the conductor.

The other reason is that Whole Group interpretations in the early phases defeats the group's wish to turn him into a Bion Dependency basic assumption leader. Individuality in a group is prone to feeling affronted when addressed as a collective, it is a narcissistic bruise. (A Basic Assumption Group is an example of a simple undifferentiated group in contrast with a complex one).

POSITIVE

Observable Behaviour

There is a marked contrast between the observable behaviour and the deeper anxieties in the early phases of a group.

1. Stylised speech and anxious friendliness as members employ familiar forms of social defence.
2. Sharing information e.g. names, jobs, symptoms.
3. Discussion about rules e.g. confidentiality, lateness, empty chairs, and what to talk about etc in an attempt to define in advance what sort of group it will be.
4. An emphasis on equality and a difficulty recognising difference, e.g. we are all the same, men/women, black/white.

Dynamic

1. Anxiety in the face of the unknown -> leader centred -> dependent anxieties.
2. Need to be approved of and to belong via supportive identification.
3. A search for structure and orientation in the face of regression and dependency anxieties.
4. Avoidance of prejudice and denial of differences and competitive feelings. Because individuals have just met prejudice is high yet dangerously divisive for a group trying to move away from seriality to wholeness.
5. Much idealisation and projection. Members vulnerable to projective processes where others reflect unconscious elements of the self, mirroring.
6. Oscillations, between wish/fear of merging and wish/fear of isolation.

Unconscious and Theoretical

1. Search for good introjects in the face of annihilation/disintegration anxiety caused by absence of leader/structure and regression. Illusion of leader in possession of the ideal object.
2. Helplessness, envy, narcissistic.
3. Part object relating -> prejudice. Sexual interest/excitement.

Conductor

Responds to group dependency by measured frustration of it and deflection. Speaks to the group to reassure it through the tone of his voice confident that his words will not be heard or remembered. May have to keep the brakes on or rescue a member in danger of too early over exposure. Tunes the transference, too much -> group distortions -> confrontation -> drop outs, too little -> no analytic group. Conductor delivers group into next phase by frustrating the idealisation.

NEGATIVE

Observable Behaviour

1. Talk expressing a tension between good group/bad group, good leader/bad leader causes increased confusion.
2. Criticism of authority figures, organisations, fees. Conductor interprets this as anxious expressions of a wish to attack him, results in
3. Agazarian's barometric event, an angry attack on the authority of the leader as the person responsible for the bad feelings.
4. Rivalry, competition, envy and anger. Silences. Individuals being hurt by each other due to strength of transference and persecutory sensitivity.
5. Establishment of individual roles within the group.

Dynamic

1. Negative transference to conductor and/or group.
2. Transference v Reality. Assertion of individual ego v Group Illusion.
3. Splitting + denial + projection = Scapegoating

Unconscious and Theoretical

1. Lapses into depression due to disillusion from loss of ideal and hence life. With loss of ideal comes reduced ideology which then will allow a growth towards differentiation.
2. Primary process gives way to secondary process.
3. Destructive expressions of anger + rediscovery of leader/group allows a capacity for object use to develop.
4. Anxiety about "group madness". Individual isolation = lopped off v individuality loss via engulfment by group.

Conductor

1. Needs to allow group's loving then destructive projections to enter him. Group may not be able to feel proper Object loss without the conductor feeling somewhat destroyed.
2. Leader must survive without retaliation. Group may need to attack many times though some do far less.
3. Conductors statements, perceptions and handling of this delivers group to next phase.

COHESION

Observable Behaviour

1. More interpretive and reflective mode of relating.
2. Simpler and more direct statements made so the group sounds less stylised. As defence against intimacy lessen a wider range of subtler feelings occur.
3. Changes are noticed, redistribution of roles -> interpersonal resolutions and members find security in the group rather than live holding on to the walls.
4. The group can take on far more now and talk about the potential mine fields of religion, ethnic minorities etc, which they could not do before.

Dynamic

1. More group centred rather than leader centred.
2. Group faces loss at breaks and members leaving rather than deny.
3. Members function as containers/lovers etc for each other in the multiple transferences rather than direct it all to the leader.
4. Death of illusion allows group to learn and develop + intrapsychic healing.
5. * In this phase there is less contrast between the observable level and the unconscious level. The cohesion is between what is expressed and what is felt. In earlier phases what is expressed is often a defense to what's felt.

Unconscious and Theoretical

1. Introjection of whole group as an object.
2. Reduced transference and whole object relating. Good and Bad together.
3. Reparation -> Intimacy -> Love and the restoration of individuality.

Conductor

The conductor's task becomes generally easier in so far as he no longer has to face such a strong tide of whole group material aimed at him. He can at times still feel remote from the group but not in the same way as in earlier phases. In the earlier phases remote takes on the quality of "Shut out" and being made mute through the group's active though often unconscious effort to do without him. This countertransference is often an early indicator of a group's destructive projective attack waiting in the wings. In this later phase the remoteness must be the wrong word because his position is now more secure as a member of the group and though he may be silent he is often able to feel closer to the group.

TERMINATION

Observable Behaviour

1. There is often a resurgence of symptoms or its opposite, flight into health. This is caused by an anxiety of a return to the state of abandonment. The whole of therapy can be seen as a preparation of the group or individual to take on and make use of the final act of termination and face it not being there any more.
2. There are many short silences. These silences have been compared with the empty spaces of words, thoughts and gestures which have never been uttered or made.
3. A consolidation of insights and gains made during treatment.
4. Dreams of exiting, climbing as well as contemptuous dreams which attempt to destroy and foul what was valued. Also acts to destroy.

Dynamics

1. A resurgence of original separation anxieties echo in the group, e.g. "Can't we carry on meeting? Let us have an annual reunion?"
2. Denial. In an open group there's an attempt to keep good members. In a closed group some members may try to break away first. These have been known to leave the group with a memento or parting shot. Some times there is a first expression of anger or a first opening up obtainable by the finite state of the group. There is a question to be answered here.
3. An effort to take care of unfinished business, to end and resolve on a reparative note. To make peace with the dead and leave guilt free.
4. A feeling of real relief, that it is over and one is free and on one's own again.

Unconscious and Theoretical

1. Either depression in the face of death or its manic defence.
2. The horror and the courage at having to face life alone again. This time it is with the hope that it might be different because of an internalised "good group". There is a benign period of insight which continues after the end of the group for an indefinite time.

Conductor

The conductor's role is activated again. He has to keep the group pointed in the right direction, towards facing the end. He has to urge the potential drop-outs to keep attending, and to encourage the group to say to each other all the things that have been left unsaid.

Norman Vella
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