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Differences in Groups: Heterogeneity and Homogeneity

Introduction

We often think about a group of people in terms of what they have in common; their differences, however, can also be important, especially those with an obvious social significance. In a therapy group we have to go beyond a legalistic or politically correct way of looking at racial, gender and other differences. We have looked in detail at the ways in which the group conductor strives to make the group a safe space where a wide variety of feelings can be explored without being enacted. Group members' also need to be able to explore their differences in the knowledge that that there will be no active reprisals. The group conductor must develop her own personal awareness to make full use of her counter-transference just as she does in other emotionally significant areas. She will, for example, need to explore her own responses to disability, and also be clear about how the group's boundaries will make exploration of this theme safe. Looking at the differences between people can be a difficult and painful process; it is important to understand the origin of such difficulties. It is only through looking at what actually happens in groups that the necessity of confronting differences becomes apparent.

As part of this discussion we will look at the reasons for sometimes selecting therapy groups in which all members share a common problem, attribute or situation, such as a group for people with alcohol problems, a group for Asian mothers or for people with eating disorders. We will discuss how such homogeneous groups can be helpful and how, even in these groups, the conductor needs to be aware of the differences between the group members.

The Psychology of Difference

What makes difference difficult?

Being in a group highlights the conflicts that everyone has about being the same and being different. A person often wants to be part of a group so that she can be with other similar people and can feel a sense of warm togetherness. Yalom (1995) suggested recognition of similarity (universality) with others is one of the most important factors in group therapy. However, the experience of similarity and sharing may make you lose your sense of yourself and feel too merged into the others. Regaining your sense of individuality can be a discomforting process as you become aware of differences between you and other group members, which may make you feel jealous, deprived, snobbish, competitive or isolated.

Let us take an example from daily life: George is poring over brochures trying to decide whether to go on a skiing holiday. Apart from the practical considerations such as the timing, the cost, the snow and the ski-lift, he is thinking about the group. He likes the idea of having companions. The brochure seems to be aimed at people like him, who do not want a run-of-the-mill holiday. He can imagine fitting into this group of people, getting to know them on the journey out and developing a convivial atmosphere. He has almost decided to book his holiday when he is beset by other thoughts and images; what if he finds it hard to like some of the other people? Perhaps they will want to go to after-ski venues which George would find distasteful and he would feel compelled to join them. He begins to imagine himself swept up in a group desire which will overwhelm his individuality and which he will be unable to resist.

Looking at George's dilemma about this putative skiing group we can see how they illustrate the basic forces of attraction and repulsion in groups. Initially, George liked the idea of being part of a group with shared aspirations; implicit in this was probably some covert assumptions about age, class, education and possibly ethnicity.

George begins to have doubts for two apparently contradictory reasons. He worries about feeling negative towards people in the group who are different from him. He is also afraid that the pressure to be similar will make him lose his identity and sweep him up in a current of conformity. Paradoxically, his fear of being merged or submerged may lead him to define himself as different, in opposition to others to whom he attributes negative qualities.

If George had started to analyse his responses, he might have surmised that he was fearful of being envious and competitive towards other members of the party. Perhaps he had fantasies of developing a relationship with one of the women in the party, which might result in his pushing out other men or being ousted by another man himself. These feelings in turn might have strong resonances with George's own family experience. Since George is only planning a holiday he may not want to think about himself in this way, but in a therapy group whose purpose is to understand what people feel about each other, these differences need to be explored, for underlying the feelings are some basic psychological and social dimensions of experience.

The roots of the difficulties

As we saw in Chapter 2, in early infancy the baby has little sense of the difference between himself and the mother (or carer). Being part of someone else (as the baby was in the womb) can give a wonderful sense of safety and belonging. The recognition that he is not part of his mother is learned slowly and painfully, as he discovers that she can withdraw from him and his needs. How this is learned may be a crucial determinant of the person's capacity to have a full emotional life. Can the baby learn that the mother is separate and different, feel loss and anger and yet still be able to feel closeness and love for the mother? Can the baby learn to mobilise the anger in ways which allow for him to develop creatively or is the anger harnessed to destructive or self-destructive ends?

This process is not an all or nothing affair. For the majority of people, the internal world consists of various aspects of the self being represented in what Bollas (1993, p. 197) describes as a **parliamentary order**, with different aspects jostling to be heard and processed. Bollas suggests that when things are not too pressured, all goes well and the plurality and ambivalence of the world and relationships can be accepted within the individual. However, when there is strong psychic pressure, the processing ceases and instead different parts of the self are projected out into other objects. This has two important consequences; others are invested with the bad qualities which the individual can no longer bear to keep inside and the individual himself feels depleted. Those designated as *other,* who are different, can easily be seen as bad, while *I* remain good. Bollas describes this as the origin of what he terms the **fascist state of mind.**

The unconscious attempts to resolve the painful aspects of difference and differentiating are reinforced within society by the way in which social splits acquire a history of antagonism and power differentials, often leading to exploitation of one group by another and the abuse of power. In other words, within society we have categories of people who become psychological dumping grounds for others. An obvious example of this is racism where white people split off negative aspects of themselves which are projected into black people, whom they then attack for *being black*. This process is intensified for both black and white people by the history of colonialism and imperialism, including the enslavement of black people by whites (Dalal, 1997). What this extreme (although not unusual) example reiterates is that each individual is formed not only by the interactions between himself and his family, but also by the social and historical context within which he lives.

The feeling which one person has towards another is given additional meaning by the social nature of the relationship between the two. The interaction between an Indian woman working in the post office and her white working-class customer, who is upset because her new benefit book has not arrived, is influenced for both by the history of colonialism and imperialism in the past. It is further affected by common forms of social projection which may allow either of the two people involved to think that somehow the Asian postwoman is responsible for the white customer's plight. Similarly some of George's fears about the skiing holiday may be connected to his self-image as a white, educated, middle-class man, who is afraid his masculinity will be threatened by seemingly stronger and sexier working-class men. George's sense of identity may be maintained by excluding certain attributes. He may then split them off into people from *other* groups, such as more powerful middle-class people, women or working-class men.

These differences are often reinforced by imbalances of social power which may be at variance with the individual's fantasies. Thus the white working-class customer has the fantasy that she is being deprived by the Indian postwoman. Remembering Bollas' account of the development of the fascist state of mind (which might be in any of us) the customer is feeling deprived, devalued, angry and lacking in self-esteem. She needs someone to blame; she wants to focus her anger on someone whom she perceives as hurting her. She also wants to do something with the bad feelings she has about herself and the part she may unconsciously believe that she has played in creating her own deprived circumstances. Mentally she places both the power and her badness

inside the postwoman. She then feels even more depleted because she has lost both her benefit book and her internal power.

Yet historically, the relationship is based on the events which led the Indian postwoman to become a resident of the UK and the white working-class customer to be living on state benefit. Perhaps both had experienced harassment on the streets or in their homes. George also feels potentially at the mercy of all the imagined members of his skiing trip.

These complex interrelationships are played out in a therapy group which can develop understanding for all the members if the social aspects and the issues of subjugation and domination are taken up.

LEARNING POINTS

- Group conductors need to look at their own responses to socially significant differences in the same way as they need to be as aware as possible of other aspects of their emotional life.
- Within a group the individual wants to be like the other group members and at the same time fears that his own identity may be submerged by the group. In this environment inner conflict may be expressed in terms of hatred of another socially disadvantaged subgroup.
- The origins of the hatred of other social groups lie both in primitive psychological mechanisms and in the social and political context.

Working with Differences in Groups

Giving the subject a voice

A group may intensify the degree of splitting and projection between members while also offering the possibility of examining the projections and helping individuals to re-own their split-off parts. Where this involves socially charged differences, it is particularly important for the group conductor to acknowledge them and enable them to be voiced, both within herself and in the group. Blackwell (1994, p. 202) argues that the maxim that the conductor should follow where the group leads does not mean that the conductor should avoid making interpretations about rivalry, dependency or sexuality if these are not explicitly

mentioned in the group. Similarly she should have her antennae tuned to issues of colonialism and racism (and other relevant social and historical issues) even if these are not overtly spoken about. The group conductor needs to be attuned to the **social unconscious.**

CASE EXAMPLE

In an ongoing therapy group, a new member was introduced. In the first session there was a very light and warm atmosphere. The discussion was about games which group members had played with their brothers and sisters. The new member joined in saying she was the middle one of three children, had always felt left out being neither special as the eldest, nor the baby of the family. Another group member identified with this saying she would never have three children.

The group conductor felt as if she was invisible, was enraged and bursting to say something. She could not tolerate the light tone in contrast with her state of mind. Reminding herself to think about her countertransference, she restrained herself from speaking and allowed her mind to wander. How could she feel so upset about being ignored by the group when they had a new member in a wheelchair, who was so obviously disadvantaged? The group conductor felt helpless and began to picture herself with her leg in plaster and a pair of crutches resting on the chair. Her leg was uncomfortable but the rest of her body relaxed. As she experienced the release of tension, she saw herself sitting next to the new group member slightly separated from the rest of the group. As long as she too was suffering from a disability she could be close to the new person and not feel guilty. She had as much right as anyone else to speak. Were the other able-bodied group members trying to find a way of identifying with the woman in the wheelchair in order to escape from their discomfort at the disability?

The group conductor said that the group was behaving as if they were all suffering from the disability of being blind and unable to see the new member in the wheelchair. She suggested that this allowed the whole group to be the same in their blindness, perpetuating the family myth that all children are treated the same and loved equally. One or two group members were relieved and able to say that they hadn't known how to react when the new member arrived in a wheelchair. They were afraid of upsetting her. The new member was able to say that she had expected them to be dismayed and disappointed that someone like her was joining the group. The group conductor no longer felt so angry and excluded but was aware of the hurt and pain in the room.

In this session, the group members were denying their feelings towards the newcomer. They felt paralysed (or as the conductor put it, blinded) by the complexity of their ambivalent and guilty feelings. They were jealous of the new baby who, with her disability, might take more of

mother's attention. They were frightened of their negative and hostile feelings towards the disabled woman, perhaps even feeling pleased that they were not in the wheelchair. They also had more conventional responses such as pity, sympathy and even curiosity about a physically vulnerable person whom they did not want to hurt. Some of them were aware of the unwelcome attention she might receive in her daily life as well as the practical difficulties. They did not want to appear prejudiced so they tried to resolve their conflicting feelings by not noticing.

The new group member also used her well-established protective shell prior to the group conductor's intervention. She colluded with the denial of her difference when she spoke about her lack of specialness in her family. She repressed her rage about her condition and other people's incapacity to respond appropriately, drawing on her own social conditioning as a person who has to cope with both the social stigma and the practical problems associated with her condition.

The group conductor based her intervention on her countertransference, and initiated a situation in which they could begin to work on the unconscious meanings of disability for them as individuals and as a group.

The crucial first step is for the group to begin to speak about the taboo topic. As long as this does not happen, the whole group may be stuck and neither those members who belong to the minority grouping nor the rest of the group will have a full voice. Although there may be common issues of social power, and common processes of splitting and projection, the specific forms of fantasy, conflict and silence vary with the particularity of every difference. We have deliberately chosen examples from a range of social differences to encourage readers to explore their own experience as widely as possible.

Both Rippa (1994) and Blackwell (1994) describe situations where once the *secret* about the oppressed group members is spoken about it enables those members to participate much more fully in the group, bringing in personal material. Rippa describes how the only Arab member in an otherwise Jewish group in Israel at the time of the Gulf War was enabled 'to work out personal issues that he could not believe that he could bring up in a training group. His speech changed and his voice became louder and clearer.' Interestingly enough, the Arab member identified himself rather than being helped by the group conductors. Rippa explains that: 'The heightened emotional climate of the war was the trigger', thus suggesting that under normal circumstances the conductors would have had to be more active in encouraging the group to speak about the difference.

Blackwell writes about another training group, in England, which had three black and five white members. It was only through a series of steps taken by the white group conductor that the black members were eventually able to 'recount their almost daily experience of racism' (1994, p. 199). He began by acknowledging that it might be difficult for one of the black group members to be in a group where English jokes were told which he could not follow. Then he pointed out that something strange was happening in a group which decided to define an Irish group member as not being an immigrant, thus implicitly saying that only black members were immigrants. This enabled the black members to join the group in a different way. 'They found a greater freedom to talk about their families and culture which could be recognised by the other group members as being significantly different from white English family and community life' (p. 200).

These examples show how vital it is to speak about the *awkward* social differences in a group. They also raise two important questions: how can such issues be explored in a group when the minority consists of one? Is it possible to go beyond speaking about the difference, to a deeper level of exploring it within a heterogeneous group? Answering these questions will lead on to the discussion of the value and limitations of homogeneous groups.

Group composition and social factors

Chapter 3 looked at the way in which a group is selected, trying to ensure that no group member is noticeably isolated from the start. These considerations also apply to the issues discussed in this chapter. We have seen how the majority group may try to protect itself and the lone individual by denying any difference, an inverted form of scapegoating, or the individual may actually be scapegoated in more or less subtle ways.

When the differences are acknowledged, the majority may demand that the isolate take up the role of spokesperson for her particular grouping; for example, explaining her experience as a black woman. This locates difference in blackness as if the experience of being white does not require discussion. If she challenges this, refusing to take on the role of group educator, she risks alienating other group members and may need the conductor's support. Alternatively, if she wants to work out her personal problems, she may decide to keep quiet and as Blackwell describes it, take on 'the status of honorary white'. Blackwell comments: 'The fact that a whole dimension of their experience is

ignored may not be a small price to pay, but at least it is a price they are used to paying' (1994, p. 204).

In practical terms, where a service allows for selection, it is most effective to try to ensure that there are no isolated group members. A mixed-race group works best when there are at least three members of each subgroup. A pair can feel both isolated and forced into an unchosen relationship. However, often the choice is between being the only person with, for instance, a disability or no therapy at all. Here several factors have to be considered. First, it will be up to the group conductor to maintain her awareness of how disability/able-bodiedness may affect what happens in the group, to contain the feelings and to work with them, bearing in mind the power differential. She will have to judge, and discuss in supervision, how much of this she should make explicit and how much the whole group will suffer if differences are denied. Much of this will depend on the individual's and the group's particular capacities and defences.

The conductor will have to think about whether this particular person has enough ego-strength and motivation to gain something from the group, in spite of the inevitable blunderings which will take place, and of the possibly insufficient exploration of certain aspects of her experience.

The concerns of a homosexual joining the group may be different from those of a black person or a person with a disability. The black person has always been black, whereas the homosexual may have spent part of his life identifying himself as a heterosexual or passing as such. Moreover he may see homosexuality as a chosen rather than a received identity. A woman who has developed a disability only in adult life will be dealing with different issues from the one who was born blind. Any group member has the potential to become disabled or to discover their homosexual desires whereas a white person cannot become black, but might choose a black partner and have a black child. This has implications for the dynamics of difference and informs the discussion about homogeneous groups.

Beyond the first step

Making the social difference visible in the group opens the horizon out for all the members, raising the question of how far a mixed or heterogeneous group can go in understanding each other's underlying experiences. Not to go further will diminish the value of the group to both the

less and the more powerful subgroupings. For some it may be intolerable and they will leave.

Returning to the example of the group with one disabled member, all the members will constantly be reminded by her presence in the group, of how it is to live in a predominantly able-bodied society. Her presence may highlight feelings in other group members about dependency and independence, damaging and being damaged, and self-image, for example. The challenge is to unpack these experiences without reinforcing them through making the woman in the wheelchair listen to more expressions of rejection, patronising remarks or disgust.

We do not want to underestimate what is involved in addressing these issues, nor do we think that the group-analytic approach has easy answers. What we can do is show how thinking about our experience in this work can help the group conductor and the group to develop a greater capacity to work with all group members.

The next example shows how one white group conductor and his mixed-race group learned slowly and painfully to begin a dialogue; the dialogue was about how it felt to be black, to experience racism and its psychological effects, and how it felt to be white and to begin to really hear this and acknowledge the complicity of white people who did not consciously wish to be racist.

CASE EXAMPLE

> The therapy group had three black and four white members. Paula, a black group member, found the group distressing and feared it jeopardised her relationships at home and at work. Paula found her distress as unacceptable as the dreadful smell which she believed emanated from her. Group members had told Paula that she did not smell and had interpreted it as a way of expressing how bad she felt about herself. June, a white woman, told Paula that she had found expressing her feelings helpful although other group members agreed that it could be disruptive to relationships outside the group. While Paula was talking about herself, Shirley (a white woman) said that she urgently needed to talk about something in the group. Paula apologised and there was no further discussion of the incident. Soon after Paula announced that she was too distressed to continue in the group.

The group conductor thought that he had been wrong to choose Paula for a once-weekly group, rather than thinking about the group dynamics preceding Paula's departure. When he presented the group to a case discussion seminar he was amazed to find that the black and white members of the seminar were soon locked into a polarised argument. The black therapists felt that the conductor had not taken Paula's needs

seriously or been aware of how the other black group members felt when Paula became so distressed and left the group. The group conductor felt crushed, as if his expertise in group therapy was being devalued. As an Irish man, he had seen himself as a fellow immigrant to England, having a special empathy with black people. Now he was virtually being accused of being a racist; and they didn't seem to be concerned with all the group members, only the black ones. Was he being told that black people needed protecting from white therapists like himself?

Meanwhile, the black therapists were despairing. They thought the white group conductor had not even attempted to understand what might be happening for the black people in his group. They felt angry and protective. They wondered whether it would not be best to have all the black patients seen by black therapists.

While the therapy group had evicted or lost Paula, the case discussion group was polarising between black and white members. The two convenors of the case discussion suggested that this polarisation needed to be understood. They reminded the discussants that talking about racial issues was bound to be stormy because it was about racism; something which affected even the most determinedly anti-racist person. This reassured the black discussants that their viewpoint would be heard and also calmed the white participants as they felt less personally accused and guilty.

Eventually they developed an account of the group process which suggested that neither the group conductor nor the group members had been able to think about how Paula's blackness might have influenced what happened in the group. While reassuring Paula that she did not smell bad and trying to interpret her symptom, no one had related it to her feelings about being black. They did not acknowledge that the way black people are often labelled as dirty in this society might have affected Paula's feelings about herself. The group would have had to face racism just as the case discussion group had done. For Paula to have got rid of her fear of smelling, some of the other unsavoury feelings would have had to be shared around the group.

Unconsciously the group conductor had been afraid of a polarised conflict between black and white people in his therapy group; in the case discussion what he feared happened. The ugliest feelings were expressed: black and white people polarised, but as a result they communicated. There was no need for a scapegoat. Subsequently in the group the conductor became more confident in encouraging dialogue between white and black members.

CASE EXAMPLE

A few months later June (a white group member) said that in her experi-ence all black men are bastards. There was a silence; the group conductor wondered what to do and wished she hadn't said it. He could feel the intense discomfort in the room. Usually he waited to see how the group would respond to a provocative statement but he realised that this would allow the group to become a place in which there was no possi-bility of addressing racism. If he said nothing the group would become unsafe for black members and, in a different way, for white ones too. If he challenged June, she would become entrenched, angry that her suffering was always minimised while others were given special treatment. The other group members would be able to maintain their positions as never having unpleasant thoughts or feelings like June's.

Eventually he broke the silence saying that it wasn't acceptable to make generalisations about black men (or any other types) in the group but perhaps June wanted to talk about what was behind the statement. June was furious with the group conductor. She had been encouraged to speak freely in the group and now she was told to shut up; the group conductor favoured the black members and the young women. He wanted to ingra-tiate himself with them. In an emotional outburst she told the group how no one had loved her, she felt worthless and as the eldest of a huge family her needs were never noticed. Hugh said it was strange that she didn't express more resentment to the group family as she had to share with them too. Why was she so busy talking about black men in general rather than what she felt about particular black people in the group?

Following this session June was absent; she rang to say she was ill. On her return she was shaky and still angry with the group conductor. Meanwhile the group, without June, had had a chance to talk through what had happened and to understand both how June displaced her anger onto black people and how the more overtly liberal members used June as a mouthpiece. June expressed her deprivation within the group at being offered a paltry hour and a half a week when she needed at least twice-weekly groups, if not more. Once June had been challenged about venting her feelings on anonymous black men outside the group, but invited to explore those very feelings within the group, she was able to recognise and express her envy of the black women in the group who, as she saw it, got more attention than she did. She began to connect the group and her family understanding her resentment of the group conductor/parent who would not give her special attention. Other group members identified with the way June displaced her feelings about the pain and abuse of her own childhood onto 'black men out there' rather than working with the feelings aroused by actual individuals within the group. Other white group members were able to recognise that they wanted to distance themselves from June to avoid their taboo racist feel-ings. They acknowledged how difficult it is to think about what black people had to put up with or to feel implicated in racism. Paul, one of the white men, remembered that he had ignored what Doreen (the oldest

black woman in the group) was saying, had changed the subject and no one had stopped him.

'Even our holier than thou group conductor has dirty hands in this matter.'

General laughter followed. This enabled Anita, the youngest black woman, to talk about how it had felt to be shouted at in the playground just because you were black. The black women moved on to discuss how they were treated in public places.

White and black people are talking about their different experiences in a group and can tolerate listening to each other. The group conductor had learned that he needed to make the group safe for discussion to take place between black and white group members just as he was responsible for other aspects of the group's safety. He realised that trying to smooth over the differences might lead to another black person leaving the group or a reduced level of participation among the black members. He also recognised that by allowing June and other white members to perpetuate their displacements onto black people they too would not be gaining all they could from the group. He had gained courage from surviving the conflict in the case discussion group and was able to intervene in a direct way. He deliberately drew a firm boundary against the acceptance of racist talk while making it clear to all group members that he was interested in what lay behind such statements, even if it was profoundly disturbing.

We have looked at the importance, the potential and the difficulties in working with social differences in groups, tried to understand some of the underlying dynamics and thought about how the group conductor can intervene. We have stressed the importance of the group conductor working on her own **social unconscious**, recognising that aspect of self-knowledge has been underdeveloped in training until recently.

However, groups which are structured around an issue or a quality shared by all the group members are also valuable, and we now turn to them.

LEARNING POINTS

■ Speaking about the differences in a group, rather than pretending they are not there, is an essential first step. The conductor may have to do this if the group members seem unable to.

- Once the differences in the group are explicit it can be particularly enabling for the more *oppressed* group members to make use of the group. It is also freeing for the whole group.
- When group members are being selected it is important to pay attention to issues such as race, sexual orientation, disability or age and include more than two members from a particular social grouping.
- When this is impossible the conductor will think with the potential isolate about whether he will be able to make use of the group and how the conductor can best facilitate him.
- In selection and in the work of the group it is important to recognise that the meaning of, for example, homosexuality for the individual will be different from the meaning of, for example, being black.
- Once a group does begin to explore unconscious social issues the conductor will receive powerful projections which need to be taken to supervision for discussion.
- A supervision group can mirror the dynamics of a therapy group and if this is understood provides a valuable vehicle for learning.
- It is helpful for everyone concerned to be reminded that, within an historically racist society (such as the UK), all members of that society will be affected even where their conscious beliefs are strongly anti-racist. (The same goes for other issues such as homosexuality or social class.)

Homogeneous Groups

Assumptions about homogeneous groups

In everyday life a person who is struggling with a new and difficult experience may be helped by talking to others in a similar position. A new mother at the baby clinic chats to others as she is waiting to see the nurse and doctor. She discovers that other mothers have felt at the end of their tether after sleepless nights, have found breast feeding painful and difficult, or have felt guilty at changing over to bottle feeding. A man who has recently lost his job finds it reassuring to talk to others in a similar position and to recognise that he was not dismissed for being an inadequate worker.

A professional working with clients or patients may draw similar conclusions, thinking it would help them to talk to each other. A GP, who sees several unemployed male patients with minor physical symptoms and depression associated with loss of jobs, may think they would

benefit from talking to each other. A social worker notices that a significant number of her adult women clients have been sexually abused in childhood; it might help them to talk together in a group. A counsellor working with the shocked victims of a ferry disaster notices such similarities between what is being said that he thinks the counselling should be re-organised into groups.

Hudson (1990) suggests that there are three main reasons for conducting homogeneous groups. Some people need different treatment because of their vulnerability and thus could not be expected to join a mixed group. This might be true for a schizophrenic patient and also for those addicted to alcohol or other drugs. Some need the presence of those who have shared a similar experience to transform it from something unthinkable to something which can be thought about, integrated into their personality and thus be made more manageable. This might apply to disaster survivors. Others need a homogeneous group to validate a particular area of experience which might otherwise be drowned out in a heterogeneous group. This might apply to all those sharing a particular social identity such as an ethnic minority group or lesbians.

We will show how all of these factors are present to varying degrees in homogeneous groups and can make them a valuable form of treatment, and at times, the treatment of choice.

CATEGORIES OF HOMOGENEOUS GROUPS

- Groups for people suffering loss or bereavement, for example children who have lost a parent, widows, recently disabled people.
- Groups for people who share a problem such as eating disorders, people who abuse alcohol or other drugs, compulsive gamblers or have a serious illness.
- Groups for people who are having difficulties in a shared phase of life, for example parents' groups, students' groups, groups for the elderly.
- Groups for people who have been victims of abuse or disasters, for example children or adults who have been raped or sexually abused, people who have been tortured, those who have suffered accidental or natural disasters.
- Groups for the perpetrators of various forms of abuse and crime.
- Groups for people sharing a particular social identity chosen or not, for example working-class people, rich people, black people, other ethnic groupings, lesbians or gay men.
- Groups for those diagnosed as having similar psychological or psychiatric problems, for example schizophrenics, agoraphobics, obsessional people.

Beyond common sense

Often homogeneous groups are seen as being akin to self-help and the group conductor thinks that the group-analytic approach which she applies for other groups is irrelevant. We have argued that a group-analytic way of thinking can help groups to be far more effective but applying it to homogeneous groups requires a different way of working.

The value of homogeneous groups for sharing similar experiences has been recognised. 'Survivors of the same experience provide support and containment by virtue of their shared experience' (Garland, 1991).

A group for compulsive eaters illustrates how the work goes beyond simple sharing and encouragement. Initially the eight women in the group find relief in sharing the private difficulties they have had for years in trying to control what they experience as an obsession with food, and the terrible associated feelings about their bodies. Finding that others in the group lead similar *double lives* breaks the isolation. It also lessens feelings of shame and abnormality. This can encourage a woman to look behind her apparently self-destructive behaviour and discover its meaning.

A woman who cannot begin to translate her unwanted behaviour and preoccupation with food into emotional terms may need to have her experience validated and understood *within its own language* before she is ready to enter the arena of the heterogeneous therapy group where the work of translating her behaviour into communication with others can be developed. As well as the need for a group which can share the metaphorical meaning of food, there may also be social factors at work. Not having control around food has a profound social stigma attached to it and the preoccupation with body image and staying slim are so prevalent that it may be difficult to create an environment in which such social attitudes can be temporarily held at bay so that initial work can be done. The homogeneous group can provide this setting before a woman is ready for the more robust heterogeneous group setting.

A study of self-help groups for compulsive eaters showed the difficulties homogeneous groups face in taking their members beyond the stage of sharing (Parry Crooke, 1980). Initially, these groups functioned well without group facilitators and members found them helpful and harmonious. After about six months the groups ran into difficulties and asked for professional support. What emerged at this stage was that the groups began to move on from their original preoccupation with food and fat and were beginning to look at the underlying meaning of their symptoms. Some group members were ready for this while others were not. They found it difficult to look at their differences and work through the group conflicts.

The paradox of homogeneous groups

The similarity of homogeneous group members offers each person a mirroring of her experience which can be validating and containing. At the same time, a group matrix is developing, the painful underlying feelings are being intensified and forced to the surface. The group conductor enables the group members to communicate with each other and ensure that confrontation happens in a way which does not fragment the group. As the group moves from the supportive aspects of sharing into the more frightening areas of transition and change, the group conductor enables members to see their differences within the shared meaning of what is happening in the group.

The conductor will use her transference and countertransference as she would in a heterogeneous group, but she will be translating them in terms of the shared symptom, problem or life situation. The theme is thought about group analytically.

Writing about a group for women who had been sexually abused in childhood, Rosenfeld and Dawson (1993) noted: 'It emerged from our experience and from the literature that the notion of the couple has special significance for this group.' The women's experience of coming between the parental couple meant that it was particularly important for the co-therapists to establish themselves as a working couple from the start, by ensuring that both met with each woman before the group began. One woman began to see one of the therapists, in the transference, as her mother who did not believe her or protect her from her abusing father. When the women in the group began to talk about feeling trapped in the circle this was related to the feeling of being pinned down by the abuser during the sexual act. At times the negative transference to the therapists was so strong that the women could only 'relate to the other group members, sharing their experiences and emotions with each other, knowing that they would be understood. They took from each other in a way that they could not from us.' The group conductors saw each of these incidents as having meaning within the framework of a family within which abuse had taken place.

Groups for people with a particular symptom require the therapist to think about what is happening in the group using the metaphoric language of the symptom. In Chapter 1 we saw how one member of a group for agoraphobia expressed part of the shared symptomatology of the whole group. Bulimic women recognise, through their group, that bingeing and vomiting is a metaphor for the way in which they lead their lives without digesting their own experience. A group of compul-

sive eaters discovers how the group reflects the emotional conflicts which they try to avoid or bury in being fat and preoccupied with food. Once the group members begin to translate their symptoms into words and understand how they are expressed in the relationships with each other, they may be ready to move on to therapy groups where the differences between members are immediately apparent. There they will be able to focus on new learning about themselves rather than reinforcing the definition of themselves as abused, bulimic or compulsive eater. It is important to limit the time spent in a homogeneous group so that each person's identity is able to develop beyond being defined by a symptom or a trauma.

Life cycle groups

Groups for people at particular stages of the life cycle differ in that often group members may range from people who have never seen themselves as having emotional difficulties to those with psychiatric histories. What they share is the theme of the particular transition; how they respond will be largely determined by their own past experience, their present circumstances and state of mind. Often such groups may focus on the meaning of the shared experience and how it manifests itself in the group, leaving it up to the individuals to make sense of what this means to them personally. In this respect such groups have affinities with those described in Chapter 8.

Let us look at two contrasting examples.

CASE EXAMPLE

In an experiential group for students on a counselling course the group offers students a chance to understand what the learning experience means to them. They look at the different associations they have with the beginning of the course. Perhaps it reminds them of their first day at school, arousing painful memories of leaving home and fears about whether they will be able to learn. Becoming aware of these connections enables members to acknowledge what it is like to start a course and to focus their energy on the other parts of the course.

CASE EXAMPLE

In a group for elderly patients and their carers in a geriatric hospital, Terry (1997) describes how the interaction in the group haltingly and painfully reflects themes of the experience of the elderly, making the group aware of the contrast between the younger sexually active staff and the impotent

aged patients. Thinking about death was constantly being denied, sabotaged or avoided and Terry shows how through the interaction of the group the theme of death is faced when one of the patients sings 'Danny Boy' with such feeling that many group members, patients and staff, were in tears.

LEARNING POINTS

■ The value of homogeneous groups is apparent at a common-sense level.
■ Beyond the common-sense level the group-analytic approach to group structure and process can be applied to homogeneous groups to enable them to appreciate:

1. the shared metaphors which they are using to express their underlying distress
2. the unconscious conflicts they are struggling with which can cause difficult dynamics within the group.

■ Where a homogeneous group is formed around a shared problem the life of the group may need to be limited so that members do not get stuck in their identity as a person with a particular problem. A homogeneous group can be a preparation for joining a heterogeneous group for those who need further treatment.
■ Homogeneous groups can have a special value in allowing socially repressed aspects of experience to surface which might get lost in a heterogeneous group.

Conclusions

We hope that this chapter has encouraged you to include gender, race, age, historical experience and other social issues in your thinking about what is influencing the unconscious processes in the group. We have tried to show that this dimension is as much part of the group as other categories which are a more accepted aspect of the language of counselling and psychotherapy. This is a way of interpreting what Foulkes meant when he wrote about every individual being deeply imbued with the social, and suggested that every group reflects the social context within which it takes place. At times the group conductor may need to indicate that the group is repressing the social dimension just as she

8

WORKING TOGETHER

Applying an understanding of groups in the workplace

Introduction

When students on the Groupwork course were asked about their own experiences in groups many spoke about multidisciplinary teams and staff meetings. Applying group-analytic thought and practice within the workplace requires an awareness of fundamental differences between a group designed for therapeutic purposes and one whose primary task is work orientated. While both are subject to similar unconscious processes and use similar defence mechanisms, the *purpose* of the working group is not therapy, it is work. We want to know why people at work get damaged and jobs are left undone. Emphasising the working group's **task** and its organisational **context** addresses some of the potential confusion inherent in applying unmodified therapeutic theory and practice to the world of work.

The psychoanalytic and systemic approach to understanding work in terms of role, system and task boundaries, which are violated to defend against anxiety, provides a way of thinking about the workplace which also illuminates some processes within therapy groups; similarly some insights from group-analytic theory and practice may be applicable to working groups. We have included exercises in this chapter to encourage the reader to translate from one approach to the other. However, when an outsider, with particular knowledge of group processes, is invited to help with a staff team's difficulties, she takes up the role of **consultant** (see later), rather than that of group therapist. Paradoxically, the recognition that teams and meetings are not therapy groups facilitates the application of group-analytic ideas to thinking about the workplace.