

CHAPTER TWELVE

Therapeutic pitfalls



THE MAN WHO BROKE THE GROUP SILENCE

Pitfall: fig. a 'trap' for the unsuspecting or unwary; any hidden danger or error into which a person may fall unawares

OED

Group analysis is sometimes described, tongue-in-cheek, as a broad church. This implies that the analytic process can be furthered through a wide range of styles and techniques of intervention, provided the therapist sticks to the boundaries which have been set up to maintain the stability of the group. This is true up to a point, but it is equally true that certain styles of intervention on the part of the conductor can put the group at risk or lead to unsatisfactory therapeutic outcomes. Beginners and experienced therapists alike are prone to counter-therapeutic tendencies, and the recognition of these is com-

plex, since many of them are governed by unconscious, counter-transferential dynamics. This is where supervision comes into its own. In this chapter we provide our own explorer's map, describing what we have come to recognize as some of the common pitfalls which await the unsuspecting therapist traipsing through the jungle of the group.

The reticent conductor

A conducting style which is predominantly non-interventionist and withholding may have the rationale behind it to offer the group members a blank screen which facilitates fantasies, projection and regression. All these are part and parcel of deep-reaching therapy. However, these depths can only be safely tapped if the conductor is first experienced as reliable, caring and holding. These attributes, and the conductor's empathic insights, are displayed by verbal interventions. The group therapist is, after all, the only one who owes the members professional attention and care. The others are under no such obligation; they come for their own welfare alone. The conductor's persistent silence can be experienced as uncaring and even unsafe. When the group is blocked, or when the anxiety level in the group is excessively high, the conductor's very voice can be reassuring and can help the group to return to its task.

The perils of active intervention

At the other end of the continuum is the over-zealous conductor who offers directive, controlling interventions in the form of a succession of interpretations. Ostensibly this is done to further insight, but the result may be to strengthen defences and bring about withdrawal and non-participation. The conductor may have been seduced into an all-knowing stance by the craving of the group for a strong, omniscient father figure who guides and relieves distress. In a crisis, or at a time of high anxiety, such a persona may have to be temporarily adopted. If so, it should be relinquished as speedily as possible, and a return made to a style of conducting which validates the importance of the group itself as the therapeutic agent. Overactive therapists tend to make their groups dependent on them for too long, and undermine the weaning process which is a prerequisite for achieving a secure, resilient, authentic self.

Tipping the scales towards problems and failures

An analytic group can at times develop a culture of immersion in problems and failures. This can be fuelled by a conductor who relates selectively to such material at the expense of narratives of success, achievement and pleasure. Group members who are going through a relatively fulfilled period in their lives may opt out of the discourse because they feel that their state of mind does not 'fit in', or because they fear the group's disbelief or destructive envy. This withdrawal is furthered by a conductor who consistently looks for an underlying denied conflict in all material offered and underestimates the importance of unqualified affirmation of good feelings and success.

Paddling in the shallows

The mere fact that group members are effortlessly communicating with one another in a spirit of mutual interest and acceptance, does not necessarily mean that the group is functioning therapeutically. Beginning groups especially, but also established groups, can fall back on a socially learnt repertoire of communication, such as a discussion of the issues of the day, exchanges of anecdotes, friendly banter, expressions of mutual appreciation and advice-giving. Any of these can form the starting point for an analytic journey, and it is unwise to interpret them as defensive too early. On the other hand, if this mode of communication goes on too long, or if it becomes a pattern in the group, the conductor has to look for an analytic talking point in the material and lead the group along this train of thought. In this way the conductor models the analytic attitude and the appropriate use of the group without crushing the spontaneity and sociability of the group members.

Trigger-happy interpretations

Group analysts can underestimate the perspicacity of the group, and its ability to reach insights in its own way and time. It is tempting at times to try and accelerate the therapeutic process by drawing attention to a connection which appears to be hidden from the group's collective gaze. The conductor unsure of his or her authority may

also wish to impress the group with a virtuoso performance of insight and profundity, a temptation which might become especially strong if the conductor is nursing a suspicion that the group does not hold him or her in sufficiently high regard, especially if the group seems to be getting on very well on its own.

Every group therapist has experienced the silence which falls in the wake of an interpretation. At best, this is a reflective silence, experienced as food for thought. Less happily, however, it is a frustrated or bemused silence, implying that a process has been interrupted. A gratuitous interpretation sometimes has the effect of closing down a process which was already satisfactorily under way. If the interpretation is pronounced with a note of finality, it may sound as if the definitive verdict on the material has been delivered, giving the group the message that it should move on.

Preoccupation with individuals at the expense of the group

'Not seeing the wood for the trees'

Engagement with individuals in the group rather than with the group as a whole is a legitimate ideological position in some psychoanalytic group therapies in the tradition of Wolf and Schwartz, who consciously espoused an individualistic technique and eschewed group dynamics as a therapeutic agency. In Foulkesian group analysis, however, the conductor strives to achieve a balance between attention to individuals and attention to the group as a whole. Given this theoretical baseline, if there is a tendency to engage overactively with group members to the point where the rest of the group fades into the background and loses its effectiveness as a therapeutic agency, the trail is more likely to lead to the conductor's personal needs.

A conductor's over-identification with a particular group member, or with a particular sub-group (the men, or the women, for instance) is shadowed by over-identification with a larger archetypal symbolic representative of that person or sub-group, for example 'the helpless little boy' or 'the vulnerable mother'. Equally, the tendency to ignore some individuals and sub-groups may reveal a negative counter-transference to those group members.

Preoccupation with the group as a whole at the expense of the individual

'Not seeing the trees for the wood'

This can also be a legitimate style of intervention in certain experiential models of group dynamics, and in the psychoanalytic tradition of Bion and Ezriel, but it is not a style which accords with Foulkesian group analysis, and when it does emerge in a group-analytic setting, the origins are again likely to be found with the conductor rather than in the group situation.

The problem with predominantly group-as-a-whole interventions, as with excessive reticence, is that individual group members can be left feeling unheld or unrecognized. Anxiety and frustration are increased, and group members find it more difficult to interact freely with one another in a mutually therapeutic mould or tolerate one person holding the focus for very long. Such groups tend to be affected by an increased drop-out rate and function with an over-anxious, compliant culture.

It is often difficult to know when to focus on the individual and when to focus on the group. The concept of the group as a figure-ground constellation, offering ever changing configurations of dialogue, provides a useful working model and serves as an anchor to prevent the vessel from dragging too far in one or other direction.

Steering between the Scylla of the 'here-and-now' and the Charybdis of the 'there-and-then'

Group analysts vary in the extent to which they facilitate the exploration of interactions between the group members themselves, as opposed to exploration of material deriving from group members' relationships outside the group and past experiences. Excessive preoccupation with either mode can assume defensive proportions. Although the 'here-and-now' is an interactional field which holds much fascination, it is sometimes of more interest to the conductor than to the other group members, who may be longing to bring their life situations and outside relationships into the group but feel that they have to defer to the analysis of 'here-and-now' phenomena.

Conversely, the conductor, Ulysses-like, sometimes has to turn the rudder in the opposite direction, away from experiences outside the group and towards the 'here-and-now'. This is especially important when the group is going through a moment of change, such as a change in membership or an imminent holiday break, or when the group is struggling with an intra-group event, such as an unspoken tension between group members or a pattern of group destructive behaviour.

The way in which the group analyst conducts a group is determined to a large extent by the model that has been taken in during the training, but also by the conductor's personality. The group analyst's influence on the group must not be underestimated, and it is for this reason that he or she needs to monitor personal reactions and their expressions, an act of introspection which, in the rough-and-tumble of group life, is not at all easy to maintain without loss of authenticity and spontaneity.

