Working with Trainees in Experiential Groups

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Introduction

This chapter aims to explore the processes and dynamics in experiential groups with trainees of individual counselling and psychotherapy courses. While group training programmes obviously expect their trainees to undergo group therapy, individual counselling or psychotherapy training programmes usually require of their trainees individual therapy only. However, there are quite a few individual training courses which offer in addition an experiential group experience as part of their training. I will argue that participation in an experiential group as part of an individual therapy training course is of great advantage for the individual trainees, personally and professionally, and for the training organisation itself.

The lack of relevant literature in this respect could be explained by the fact that experiential groups are usually conducted along general analytic or group analytic lines and therefore do not seem to warrant separate theoretical consideration. I believe there are identifiable issues pertaining specifically to experiential groups which are worth discussing.

It is important to realise that different training organisations produce different groups and therefore different group experiences. Depending on the particular training course and context, different developments will be triggered in an experiential group. The groups I will be describing reflect the context of their particular training course based on Object Relations and Jungian theory, and these approaches are reiterated together with the group analytic model in my choice of theories to describe the groups' process. Ten years prior to this I ran several experiential groups for a more broadly psychoanalytical organisation, and here the Jungian element remained more in the background. My insights and thoughts about experiential groups therefore do not describe a generally valid model, but are reflections on my way of working with a particular sample.

Theoretical background

Group analytic thinking is underpinned by psychoanalytic thinking and in fact evolved historically as a combination of psychoanalysis, sociology and biology. In addition to some major group analytic principles based on Foulkes I have selected ideas from Winnicott and Jung to explain the dynamics and processes in experiential groups. D.W. Winnicott's ideas in regard to the facilitating environment and his concept of holding illustrate the basic qualities and preconditions for any successful psychological work, and this naturally also applies to groups. I will refer to Winnicott's writing about group processes and also use his idea of the transitional space as a space for transformative processes occurring within the group.

C.G. Jung's contribution to the understanding of transformative processes based on his writings about alchemy will be another theoretical orientation utilised for the exploration of group experience. Jung's psychological interpretation of the alchemical processes in a sealed-off container, the alchemical vessel, will be described as a model for the integration of psychotic processes during the course of analytical work. As far as I can see, this aspect of Jung's work has not been appreciated fully or understood on even a basic level up till now outside of the Jungian community. An interesting aspect of the application of alchemy to groups, I believe, is the fact that the transformative processes of alchemy are much more palpable in groups, at least they can become so at certain times. In individual work the therapeutic space is still often thought of as the containing mental space of the therapist or in more recent interactive models it is defined by the processes occurring in the container provided by the consulting room space or within the therapeutic relationship. However, the therapeutic space in individual work presents itself visually to both participants always as that of a dyad. In contrast, the group setting of the circle offers a therapeutic space which is actually visible to all participants including the conductor as the space within the group's circle. The centre of the space provided by the circular setting of the group can be seen to represent the inside of the alchemical vessel of the alchemist. Analytic groups are described as slow open groups, because people leave and join the group at times, and experiential groups as part of a training programme have, unlike analytic groups, to deal with all kinds of links and overlaps with the training organisation, so neither provide a sealed container in the strict sense. However, I believe it is valid to use

the alchemical metaphor and describe the group space as a securely or hermetically sealed-off container at least for the time of any given session after the group's matrix has become established. I am hoping to show that this central space within the group can serve as a projective screen for the symbolic condensation of phenomena occurring in the matrix of the group, where transformative processes can become visible.

For the third theoretical perspective I will make use of concepts deriving from the group analytical model based on S.H. Foulkes' contribution, which incorporates social, collective and environmental aspects into the psychological processes occurring within the group as well as within the individual. His theory of group analysis is the attempt to develop an integrated viewpoint of the individual as a social being. Like Winnicott and Jung in their theories, Foulkes had to resort to a paradoxical stance, which still gives rise to misunderstandings in the group analytical community, because his theory tries to encompass the individual together with the group as a whole. I am hoping to clarify some of these misunderstandings in the course of my argument.

Outline of argument

I am going to describe the processes and the dynamics in experiential groups which I have conducted over the years. The observations mainly derive from several years of running the experiential group for the first year trainees of an analytic psychotherapy training course. In addition to the first year group, I also conducted each year a single one-off session with the trainees who had progressed to the third year of the training.

I am hoping to show that participation in an experiential group offers an advantage to students on individual training courses in that they are encouraged to reflect together on the training process which they are undergoing. The experience of membership in such a group can enable the trainees to develop mutually respectful and understanding relationships with their peers and future colleagues. This provides support for the development of the trainees' new professional identity and promotes a healthy sense of professional community. The developing awareness of group-related interactions in relation to the authority figure of the group conductor and to the training organisation as a whole, I will argue, provides a much needed balance to the dyadic and therefore limited view of traditional psychoanalytic understanding. I will also attempt to clarify in which way an experiential group, which is in fact not a therapy group, can nevertheless develop a therapeutic function. This may have an effect on the trainee's individual therapy, but also promotes the trainees' understanding of

processes of change and transformation in the more general context of the group. Trainees can observe in the group the broad spectrum of circumstances which encourage and support change and reflect on these conditions which will enrich their professional competency at the end of their training.

Differentiation from therapeutic groups

I have run experiential groups for trainees for a long time and I find this a particularly interesting and rewarding type of groupwork, because in experiential groups the conductor is faced with a variety of issues beyond the usual group therapeutic task.

Experience of change

The group consists of individuals who are not coming for help with their personal problems, but are hoping to become professionals in their own right. The trainees are working towards one day becoming colleagues of their trainers, including the group's conductor. The transferences and countertransferences in experiential groups reflect this particular dynamic, which surfaces especially around conflicts regarding envy and competitiveness and colours various psychological mechanisms and defences, such as projection and idealisation. It can be argued that the primary focus of an experiential group is not the process of personal change in the individual as such, as in a therapy group, but that its main task is an educational one with emphasis on the observation of group dynamics and process in addition to the individual expression and integration of affect (see Yalom 1995, p.523). However, individuals in professional training programmes are expected to change as well. They are expected to change into competent and confident professionals who are able to initiate and facilitate change in their clientele. They themselves also expect to change and develop a solid and reliable professional identity.

The experiential group as part of the training programme can provide the space to experience this process of professional maturation consciously from various angles. The regular group sessions allow time to reflect on the process in exchanges with peers in the same position; this also includes a mutual monitoring of everybody's progress. Experiential groups as part of a professional training programme also demonstrate that personal and professional change cannot be separated from each other in any simple way. Any change in the individual will affect the whole of the personality, and a professional training that is effective will without question turn out to be a life-altering experience. This

highlights the additional interaction between the group process and the ongoing individual analytical process of each trainee which can be supported and enriched by the group experience, but also come into conflict with it.

Responsibility and control

The setting of an experiential group is qualitatively different from that of a therapeutic group. While the time frame is usually the same, of one and a half hours duration, I have also conducted experiential groups for slightly shorter sessions, for instance of one hour and twenty minutes duration, due to restraints in the training set-up, which does not seem to restrict the effectiveness of the group experience. However, the experiential group does not take place in a private consulting room, but usually in the premises of the training organisation, often in the same room as the seminars. This means the group conductor has not the same control in regard to the physical environment as in privately run therapy groups. I once ended up with a trainee group for the last session of the term in a private consulting room where we had never met before, because the usual premises were inaccessible due to the caretaker's illness.

The lack of control might also become a feature with regard to the seating arrangements in that for instance only a variety of chairs might be available and not the same type of chair for everyone in the group. However, this can become grist for the mill for instance in the discussion of status and power differences. I have run several groups where only a limited number of armchairs was available and several people had to sit on normal, rather uncomfortable chairs. These ordinary chairs, which were out of the ordinary in the group setting, assumed the power to assign roles to those seated on them alternating between the scapegoat position on the 'hot seat' and the position of the leader on the 'throne' presiding over the group. In a therapy group where individual patients usually identify themselves, at least to begin with, as inferior in the role of the sufferer and as feeling too vulnerable to address issues with regard to power differences or authority, this added inequality would be avoided. However, for an experiential group of trainees the relation to authority figures and the negotiation of power relationships are part and parcel of the training and need to be acknowledged as inherent in any training set-up. The experiential group can therefore benefit greatly from an opportunity like this to verbalise these issues and negotiate power differentials in an open way.

Power relationships

I believe that the experiential group on counselling and psychotherapy courses has a political function. In my role as conductor of experiential groups on professional training courses I make the attempt to foster an atmosphere of openness and flexibility and apart from maintaining the boundaries of the setting I refuse to establish any rules myself. My aim is not first and foremost a therapeutic one, like reducing anxiety, promoting warmth and the development of trust; instead my aim is to create a group climate and initiate interpersonal processes between the trainees as peers and future colleagues which are based on co-operation and collaboration. While every analytic therapy group aims to develop co-operative interaction between peers, this aspect is often neglected as a part of the teaching on individual counselling and psychotherapy training programmes. Here the teaching is directed at and often limited to the dyadic setting of the interaction in the patient–therapist relationship. The experiential group offers the opportunity to develop a sense of mutual understanding and consideration between trainees, which can serve as a foundation for the forthcoming interaction in the professional community. This, I believe, is badly needed in the psychotherapeutic profession where people are often mainly working on their own and may become isolated. Training courses which do not expect their trainees to participate in an experiential group forego this opportunity.

The role of the conductor in experiential groups

The conductor of experiential groups holds considerable power as a role model and as an authority figure. This is even more pronounced when the conductor also takes part in the assessment procedure of the trainees. To counterbalance possible inhibiting effects of this, Yalom suggests that the leader should model openness and the universality of human problems, even be more self-disclosing (1995, p.522). I would disagree with this option, because I regard the crossover between the functions of conductor and assessor as extremely complicated and ultimately undesirable. It seems incompatible with the need for confidentiality which is indispensable for the experiential group to work in a satisfactory way. This does not mean, however, that the conductor cannot give general feedback on the group process to the training organisation, if the confidentiality of individual members is safeguarded. This is important, because on the one hand the conductor models the behaviour of a senior and well-experienced therapist to the trainees, who will unconsciously adopt this model for identification which

will later inform their own practice. By preserving confidentiality for the individuals, the conductor is on the other hand setting and maintaining the boundaries for the group as a whole. While an experiential group is indeed not a therapy group, it nevertheless is undergoing a therapeutic process when it works well. This process may prove not to accomplish its expected therapeutic potential due for instance to resistances or defences in individual trainees or owing to the composition of the group. However, for the group to feel safely contained in the first place a facilitating environment needs to be established, which enables trust, openness and learning from experience, and this requires the guarantee of confidentiality.

The training context of the groups

I have been running the experiential group for first year trainees for the same therapy training organisation for several years. The group meets for thirty sessions during the first year, ten sessions each term, with two long breaks of up to six weeks between the terms. It takes place in the same room as the seminars, following them after a twenty minute break. Each of the groups I have run was distinctly different in its own way. For instance one group was able to start interaction and exploration very soon, while another group was much more cautious and people needed until the second term to learn to communicate more freely. A third group in contrast struggled for the whole year and never quite came together to be able to use the group for the exploration of the relationships amongst themselves, with me or with the training organisation. It turned out to be an extremely painful group experience for everybody in the group including me, and I will describe it later on in more detail.

Over the years I have found, however, that all the groups were showing comparable dynamics and were going through a similar process, even if the timing was different in each case. I will be using my insights to describe the developmental patterns of these experiential groups as I have observed them over the years. It should be understood that I am not reporting any personal information regarding any individual trainees, but that I will give a general idea of the group process and its dynamic, conflating information where individuals are concerned. The groups I was running were confidential and the group experience did not count as part of the official assessment or evaluation process of the training. In addition, the trainees had the right to discuss their own experience of the group with the trainers if they felt the need to do so. Also all the trainees were asked to give anonymous feedback about my performance as the conductor at the end of the year.

I am aware that some training organisations even provide experiential group experience throughout the whole of the training course, for instance for three or four years running. While I have not done this work yet myself, I gather from colleagues who run experiential groups for three years with the same trainees that the processes can be of a similar nature. In a one year group the processes are obviously condensed and the dynamics become intensified. In a longer lasting group the same stages of group life may and can be repeated and reworked in a new way as the group matures. Nevertheless, I believe that the processes I will be describing are able to serve as one valid description of the processes and dynamics in experiential groups with trainees.

The composition of the groups

People who start the training course have obviously freely chosen to embark on the training. They will have been informed that the training entails participation in an experiential group and some people will even have had experience of this kind of group through former training or attendance of an introductory course somewhere else. Nevertheless, the group is not optional but is an integrated part of the training, which may be welcomed or not. Indeed the experiential group may be dreaded, if there has been a negative group experience before or if there is a fear of exposure to the powerful dynamics in groups due to earlier damaging experiences in the family or at school.

Each individual who has passed the selection procedure of the organisation will become a member of the group. The selection procedure does not necessarily pay attention to the suitability of a candidate to group exposure or to the question of whether the selected individuals will in fact be able to form and come together as a group. The task of the conductor is to facilitate this initial process of group formation, which is not an easy one nor always successful. However, the trainees' usual enthusiasm can be employed as the original bonding agent to initiate the first processes of communication in the group.

The group process in action
The beginning of the groups

The individual trainees usually do not know each other at the start of the training and this allows space for projections and powerful transferences onto each other. If the trainees want to go on with their training, the group will have

to learn to deal and cope with these mechanisms. The students will have to recognise their transferences and own their projections. This particular training organisation has also a policy that none of the trainees should know the group conductor beforehand and because of this even discouraged somebody applying for the course. The conductor's role serves as a unique projection screen for authority issues in general and the trainees will see her (the conductor) as a critical and judgemental agency intricately linked with the training organisation. As the projection carrier of parental authority the conductor may be unconsciously perceived by the group as functioning like a severe super-ego, which creates reservations or even unconscious resistances. This holds true even if the group conductor has no part in the assessment procedure of the course and the students know this. As the designated facilitator of the group the conductor holds in the beginning all the power, at least in the eyes of the trainees. Trainees are mature adults, usually already working in some or other professional capacity and they experience the loss of adult power and control at the beginning of the training as extremely threatening. However, in order to pursue their intended professional aim they will have to develop ways to utilise the group and the conductor, whether they like it or not.

However, sometimes it becomes apparent in the first session or soon after that a particular group will have enormous difficulties in developing a common matrix. Without this shared foundation the group will not be able to do any satisfactory work. It will be the task of the group conductor in such a case to make every effort to help the group communicate openly in order to resolve the difficulties.

The first term

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MATRIX

Regular group attendance is one of the basic prerequisites for the group to establish a sense of security. While attendance can be erratic in therapy groups, experiential groups usually benefit in this respect from the fact that trainees are professionally motivated, are eager to get on with their training and do not want to miss sessions. However, this is a new beginning and exultation is coupled with hesitation or even reluctance to get involved. People are concerned with safety and trust, boundaries need to be clarified, and anxieties and fear of rejection are voiced. How does one become a group member? How much can be said? How to engage with each other? How to use the group? What are the rules?

At the start all these questions are directed towards the conductor and Winnicott describes this attitude as a request for 'covering'. He introduced this term for group processes in his paper 'Group influences and the maladjusted child' (1994) in parallel with his concept of 'holding' provided for the baby by the mother. The immature group, he says, is developmentally only a collection of bits, which to begin with needs to be held together or 'covered' by a containing and supportive agency. Before integration, he says, there exists ' ...only a primitive pre-group formation, in which unintegrated elements are held together by an environment from which they are not yet differentiated. The environment is the holding mother' (1994, p.193). Winnicott's concept of the interdependent existence of mother and baby and his parallel formulation for the individual and the group allows him to transfer the parameters of the parent–infant relationship (1987b) to groups by analogy. For a group to be functional in a real sense, the group must be understood theoretically and conducted practically as a facilitating environment for the individuals in it. If a group is able to fulfil the function of a facilitating environment, the individuals in the group can develop at their own pace and according to their individually inherited potential. In the group it is the conductor who performs the function of holding or 'covering' and guarantees that the group provides a facilitating environment.

It certainly is a good sign if everybody in the group contributes and talks freely, is able to air fears and anxieties or to express scepticism about the group and the training as well as hopes. However, equal contribution is not automatically a sign that the group matrix has become established. The group matrix is the necessary foundation of any group and is based on as Foulkes says ' ...the common pool of meaning, the network of communication...' (1986, p.122).

Example

Students are describing how they made their original commitment to the training. They are reassuring each other that this training is a good choice and – since everybody seems curious in a genuine way – they urge the next person to tell their story. However, I notice that this is happening in a kind of going-around-the-circle exercise initiated and maintained by group pressure. The temperature rises and individual information is exchanged in a somewhat frantic way. 'A lot of "to-ing and fro-ing" is going on,' I wrote in my notes. Suddenly, a direct communication from one member of the group to another is made: a comment about how he presents himself to the group. Startled, people open up to listen and everybody takes note of the honest and upfront response.

A real connection has been made, the group is at the threshold of change. A few minutes later I notice that the pattern of exchange in the group has changed and that there is interaction through the centre of the group space.

This transition from the circular movement of contributions around the circle of the group to a criss-crossing pattern of direct interactions going through the centre of the group space constitutes the first transformative group event and symbolises the establishment of the matrix.[1] This event has become visible as an alteration in the pattern of exchange in the group and is an example of my idea that the central space within the group can serve as a projective screen for condenser phenomena occurring in the group. The establishment of the matrix, I believe, represents a condenser phenomenon (Foulkes and Anthony 1957, p.199) and signifies a transformative process. The emotional charge generated by this shared group event led to a deepening of communication in the group and allowed further group development. The alteration of the pattern of exchange in the group from a circular movement to interaction through the centre of the group space occurred in the group I described above unusually early in the third session. From now on the matrix can serve as a secure container; the group has become a group.

From this moment onwards the conductor will be watching and able to monitor group analysis 'in action'. The matrix of the group, 'the web of intra-psychic, interpersonal and transpersonal inter-relationships, in which the individual is conceived as a nodal point' (Behr and Hearst 1983, p.5), has been successfully launched and from now on it will develop and mature in its own way for the remainder of the time.

The individuals in the group, described by Winnicott as a collection of bits, which up till now needed to be held together or 'covered' by the conductor, have become nodal points within the network of a greater unit, the group as a whole. The conductor will now be able to relinquish her containing function to a certain degree and join the newly established network as another nodal point. However, each individual in the group remains an individually recognisable unit or separately identifiable cell with a particular function even as part of this greater organism. Like each cell in an organism, each individual entity has a specific function in the network of the group. It remains the conductor's task to monitor the processes of the group organism in order to maintain a healthy state of affairs and if necessary to intervene for the sake of it.

BELONGING AND BEING PART OF A WHOLE

Now that the group has started to function on its own, questions are no longer directed exclusively at the conductor, as they were at the beginning. What is allowed in the group and what has to be avoided, what belongs to individual therapy and what to the group, can from now on be discussed and negotiated amongst the group members and at times settled by mutual agreement. Moreover, people are becoming aware of the group's containing function and are starting to use the group. The need to belong and to be part of the newly integrated unit of the group brings anxiety-provoking concerns with regard to experiences of isolation, rejection and abandonment to the fore. In conjunction with the first integration as a group the individual defences are lowered and the recent and still unstable integration of the group precipitates a paranoid emotional state in the group as a whole.[2]

Anxieties are expressed either in direct relation to the group or the training, such as for instance, 'I don't know how to be really a part of the group' or 'Others understand the theory much better than I do' or in relation to events in the individual's life. People have talked at this time about being separated from parents or siblings, about feeling unwanted for instance when sent away to boarding school and about the frightening isolation of childhood loneliness. People with greatly different backgrounds and experiences poles apart, are working together to weave the pattern of the group's matrix. Some of the individuals now feel safe enough to step symbolically into the transitional space in the centre of the group to allow themselves to be seen. 'How can I get into the middle?' asked one trainee, who wanted the group's attention and to be in the centre, like a baby in the maternal container of the matrix or womb.[3] The image of the baby in the womb could be understood as a second condenser phenomenon appearing in the matrix. Again, as I described above, the central space within the group serves as a projective screen for an emotionally charged event occurring in the group signifying transformation. The awareness of 'being at the centre of the group's attention', symbolising the baby in the womb, is more or less consciously shared by all group members and leads to a deepening of communication, which allows further group development. It is not surprising that at this point people might squabble for space and attention. Will there be space and enough to go around for each of them? There are so many siblings — will they all be able to survive and complete the training? Will they all get their needs met or will they have to kill each other off to have enough space for themselves? Competitiveness and envy emerge in the group.

LOSS AND DEATH

In several of the experiential groups I have been running actual deaths have occurred in the lives of the trainees during the first term, that is, some friend or relative died. This is obviously due to the fact that psychotherapy trainees are mainly middle-aged adults with relatives in advanced years. However, the emotionally loaded themes of loss and death have been themes during the whole year for all the experiential groups in one way or another, paralleling the preoccupation with loss and separation in small groups in general. In addition, I relate the feelings of loss and particularly death, mourning and grief to the fact that all the trainees are in fact contemplating the possible end of an old way of life and are preparing for a new career. During the initial period of training these feelings are especially acute, and pain and grief about what has to be left behind are unavoidable. The group has to debate whether these feelings can be expressed and tolerated or whether they need to be denied. When people feel safe enough and the environment is facilitating the expression of feelings and thoughts, they can usually address these issues.

The second term

FEAR OF DISINTEGRATION

After the first break the second term continues the themes of pain, loss and death. People have missed each other, had time to contemplate things and are often more aware of the great changes they will have to make. The experience of separation during the break is often described as the 'gap'. For me the notion of the 'gap' is an indicator of psychotic anxieties, signifying the fear of the abyss of disintegration.[4] Since the conductor's understanding is part of the matrix, it is not surprising that my viewpoint makes room in the group for the experience of psychotic processes, such as splitting, denial, disavowal and so on. If the group's container is sound, the 'gap' of the break serves as a vehicle to explore unbearable or intolerable feeling states. Verbalising and sharing these intense emotional states with others strengthens the ego and facilitates the possibility of developing alternative ways for dealing with them.

Example

One trainee has not returned after the break; he has decided to leave the course. There is helplessness and fury that there is no chance to discuss it or at least say goodbye. 'How do you make contact with somebody who is not there anymore?', 'How do you connect with a person who has died?' people ask. Somebody talks about the anniversary of a death: 'It's not getting better, the loss!' Anxiety is rising. 'Will all the men leave?' How can they connect with each other again, if they are not sure that everybody will stay? Will they be able to reach out and link up after such a big gap? To think about all this seems unbearable. 'It's too painful.' One woman says that she is not feeling anything. People are talking about the need to cut off. 'Sometimes it's healthy to cut off' and, 'Sometimes it's healthy to leave, because you can't stand the pain' are some of the comments. Two sessions later one woman says that she feels she revealed too much, she feels raw, mauled and destroyed. Somebody supports her: 'Yes, the group behaved "awful", people were not human.' A sense of anger rises in the group and a rather sharp and argumentative tone develops. 'Like scorpions!' somebody comments. In the next session the group talks about the anxiety, shame and guilt that aggression creates: 'I felt mad! Like a mad woman!' one participant verbalises. 'But you need aggression to do what you want!' another person says.

GETTING WORSE

The example illustrates that feelings can now be expressed more easily, but are often experienced as unbearable and acting out can occur. People may feel exposed and either manage to express their feelings or withdraw, and individuals have run out of the group room at this stage of the process when feelings became intolerable. They did return in each case, I must say thankfully, either in the same or in the next session and things could be discussed.

After the initial experience of unity through coming together as a group, this second stage provides a chance to work through anxieties about separation. Fears of disintegration alternate with fears of confrontation. The associated emotions of aggression, fury and rage seem often unacceptable in the groups and it is a challenge for the conductor to create an opening in this respect. Some groups are more able to use this opportunity than others. If these anxieties can be faced, they ultimately lead to a sense of individual identity and the discovery of differences for the group members. If the group feels safe enough to do so, aggressive feelings of fury and rage also make space for the unfreezing of grief, and an awareness of the successively repeated 'layering' of the emotional experiences of grief and anger in the psyche can develop. In this course of events people also have a chance to experience and to express shame and guilt. The group is often profoundly moved by these difficult experiences with each other.

In groups which work really well anxieties concerning madness, badness, destructiveness and in some more mature groups even sexuality can be conscious themes. The fear of getting lost in all this 'primitive stuff', as trainees

have called it, evokes doubt, even panic at times and the desire to disengage. The decision to train can begin to be questioned anew. Towards the end of the second term the forthcoming second break seems to become a life and death issue: 'Will we survive the break?' is the anxious question. The break looms like an enormous and unbridgeable abyss during which the group may disintegrate after all. However, these feelings concerning the break can this time become a conscious theme for discussion before the break – not after it, as in the first term – and most groups are able to do so. The conscious preparation for the break has a containing function preventing further drop-outs from the training at this stage.

In 'Group influences and the maladjusted child' (1994) Winnicott describes the second stage of a group's process, following the first stage of establishing safety, as people 'exploiting' the situation, since they seem to get worse, start acting out and allow themselves to be dependent and regress. Another well-known theory of group development divides the process into four stages of forming, storming, norming and performing (Tuckmann 1965), and the second stage of 'storming' also captures this quality. In short, useful work which has a therapeutic function is done in the second stage and my experience of experiential groups in the second term as described above seems to support this view. When the group works well, the group members usually develop in the second term of the course the capacity to 'use the group as an object' for their own developmental processes and needs.[5]

BAPTISM BY FIRE – THE ALCHEMICAL METAPHOR
I see this second stage of the group process with its turbulence and upheaval as an important training experience and opportunity. The trainees are immersed in processes which seem at times unbearable and overwhelming. However, if these feelings can be contained in the group and talked about, they turn out to be invaluable for the trainees' understanding of paranoid-schizoid experience and psychotic processes. This phase can then be appreciated as a baptism by fire for the therapists coming into being. My vantage point for this particular view is provided by alchemy, using alchemical metaphors for specific psychological states of mind and transformational experiences leading to further development.

Jung's interpretation of alchemy[6] is based on the notion that the alchemists resorted to mechanisms of projection of psychological contents onto the chemical processes for the purpose of reflection on the qualities of the materials and procedures they were working on. He showed that their description of qualities of chemical elements and the transformation these elements were undergoing when mixed with each other were more often than not in fact projections of psychic contents activated in the experimenter and his attendant or between the two of them. In parallel to this Jung described the therapeutic relationship as an alchemical process between therapist and patient, following a pattern of certain stages and leading to psychological development in both participants. I am here extending his approach to the application in groups.

When two or more substances mix a new combination with new qualities is created. I demonstrated before that the establishment of the matrix of the group constitutes a mixing of a complex kind, because here several substances are involved, that is, five, seven or more people come together to form a group. When the individuals in the group have been successful in forming and becoming part of the new combination of the group network or matrix, the alchemical vessel of the group as a whole is symbolically sealed and the turbulent processes of transformation can start. From now on the centre of the space provided by the circular setting of the group can be seen to represent the inside of the alchemical vessel of the alchemist, ready to receive the projections of psychic contents activated in the group.

The first stage of the alchemical process is called nigredo, the black stage of lead, which is laden with darkness and despair. The alchemist experimented in fact especially with heavy metals, such as lead, copper, mercury and so on, which are toxic and induce, as we know today, a psychotic-like state with depressive features. From the start of their work, the alchemists were therefore subjected to this toxic state, which they called nigredo, the blackness, and which they described as a preoccupation with dark and heavy matters, such as loss, abandonment, death and despair. The alchemists saw this as the original stage of primal chaos symbolised by lead, and their goal and expectation was to transform it through hard work and devotion into gold, a more ordered stage suffused by light. From a psychological point of view we could say the alchemists were trying to transform a confused, poisoned and depressed state of mind into a more healthy one.

The psychological processes of change and transformation in a group following the establishment of the therapeutic container of the matrix can be understood in analogy to this. After the mixing together of people in a group, experiences akin to the alchemical nigredo are activated, because individual differences are becoming mixed up and this creates feelings of possible chaos and confusion. As I have described above, after the establishment of the matrix the group finds itself time and time again in a state of black depression preoccu-

pied with loss and despair. If the temperature of the emotional turmoil and intensity, the parallel to the alchemical fire heating the alchemical vessel, can be endured and consciously observed, there gradually emerges an awareness that during this process of emotional smouldering the old state of affairs is crumbling, disintegrating and dying. The former psychological structure and organisation in the individuals and in the group as a whole are falling apart. The expected new structures, which would give new solidity and security, are not formed sufficiently yet to be noticed or seen.

When the initial combination of substances had crumbled to dust the alchemist would add water and other solutions to initiate the second alchemical stage of the albedo. The alchemists described their experience of the albedo as a white, milky and watery stage and related it to silver, the soft light of the moon and the longing of love. Psychologically speaking, a liquid binding agent is added in the form of sweat and the tears of sorrow and grief to the broken-down pieces in the alchemical vessel. If the group feels safely contained throughout the upheaval of break-up and the shifting of personal boundaries, the heat of the emotional turmoil initiates a melting of the defences against pain, sorrow and grief and this unfreezing ushers in the next stage of the albedo. Here the dregs of the old psychic state are washed away by the watery flow of emotion to make room for something new. The milk of human kindness, empathy and compassion is being added to the mixture and starts to create a new cohesion. The old structure is no more and the remains now cohere to form a new shape. A new structure is emerging and things are coming together in a new way. The heat of envy, competition and murderous rage and the liquidity of compassion and sadness alternate in the group at this time in the effort to produce the new psychic structure, gradually forged in the group by rhythmic alternation between confrontation and empathy. Emotional responses of shame and guilt are often evoked at this point and some trainees have the courage to talk about them. Frequently group members express during this stage of the process how deeply moved they feel by listening to each other's difficult experiences. 'It's like being a witness' and 'You don't feel so alone' are comments from the different sides of the experience. Being genuinely stirred or moved deeply by witnessing and accompanying another person through profound changes is another aspect of the liquid experience of the albedo. Clinically speaking, the trainees at this time have a chance to observe and possibly practise projective identification in action.[7] Slowly an awareness of mutuality and reciprocity develops in the group and trainees often remark on their growing awareness of interdependence.

The last term

The original excitement of starting the training and entering a new phase of life has by now mostly faded into the background. It has been replaced by sober contemplation of the losses that will have to be faced and by the consideration of the price the trainees have to pay, for the actual training course as well as in personal terms. The monetary price of the training always becomes an issue in the third term, because the trainees are preparing to take on their first patients at the beginning of the second year of training. This means sometimes giving up existing work to make the space, and in any case a supervisor will have to be paid and the financial sacrifice can breed resentment.

GROWING UP AND COMING OF AGE

I usually interpret the preoccupation with a time some months ahead as a resistance to facing the coming end of the experiential group. The group is trying to avoid the psychological task of separation and ending by splitting and projecting the shadow side onto the seemingly cruel and demanding training organisation.[8] Separation or individuation within the context of the group, which was the assignment of the second term, has now to be replaced by the realisation of the actual impending ending and separation of the group. Will the group be able to function in the future as a mature workgroup independent from the conductor or will it break down? These themes are usually raised in the last term around the time when I tell them that I will leave them to meet on their own for a session. The discussion usually moves from 'We finally have to grow up' through 'Let's meet in the pub instead' to 'This will be interesting, let's see how it goes'.

Example

The session (first session of the last term) has started, but two people remain standing chatting to each other outside the circle of the group. I comment lightly: 'There obviously is a resistance to start the ending.' A woman feels cold and wants the fire lit and somebody else turns it on. 'It makes a sound like a faltering heartbeat,' somebody remarks. One trainee starts talking about aged parents, they will not live that much longer. Another trainee, who has lost his parents, expresses envy that others still have parents. One mother does not want to know about her daughter's private life, a father cannot remember his child's early years – he was not there. The responsibility for oneself and having to grow up seem a burden; people do not feel ready. In the next session I tell them that I will not be there in four weeks time and the talk turns to the theme of

'murdering mother.' They play with the idea of going to the pub when I am not there, but then decide to meet in the group without me.

The theme of growing up is often discussed in the groups in relation to growing old and ageing. Again, I believe, this happens to a certain extent because the trainees are mostly mature adults. However, the impending ending of the experiential group is also a coming of age for the group and the individuals in it. The group will need to develop the capacity to function in a new way without me. I believe that my absence gives the group a chance to achieve a sense of maturity, individually and in relation to the group. Winnicott says that a mature group formation is created and maintained by the organisation which well-integrated individuals bring to the group, and that the mature group benefits from the personal experience of the individuals in it, each of whom has been seen through the integration moment and has been 'covered' until able to provide self-cover (1994, p.193). My absence provides an opportunity for the trainees to explore their independence and to experience themselves as a workgroup able to perform a task and achieve objectives, in this case, to conduct a session without me.

THE NEED FOR FATHER

The example of the session given above already illustrates that at this stage the figure of the father and the parental couple as a unit can become conscious preoccupations. I became fully aware of this focus while running the third group for this organisation. In addition to the aspects mentioned in the above example there were repeated allusions to couples, and I recognised after a while the virtual image of a couple in loving embrace in the middle of the group space – another condenser phenomenon on the projection screen of the central group space, generated by the emotional charge of the group's preoccupation with the oedipal couple.[9] While theoretically aware of the importance of the negotiation of the oedipal situation for the individual's maturational process, I had not considered this consciously in application to separation processes in groups. After becoming aware of the image of the couple, I went back to my notes and found that in both groups I had run before, the parental couple had also been a theme in the second or third session of the last term. I believe this image is partially evoked by my announcement of non-attendance, which goes with the idea that I have a separate life from which the group is excluded and reiterates the oedipal trials and tribulations on the way to growing up. The group often interprets my absence as a paternal act forcing them to start to take responsibility for themselves. However, even in the first group I facilitated for this organisation, where

I did not miss any sessions in the third term because a third year of trainees did not exist as yet, 'parents' and 'father' were topics of the group conversation at this point in time.

Generational differences can now be addressed and thought about together, often again in the disguise of disagreements with the training organisation. The envy of those who have gone before and who have made it already is present in the form of negative transferences, but if acknowledged may turn into respect and the recognition that one's elders also provide a mirror or models to identify with. The need for a constructive and positive authority figure called 'father' can be verbalised. The importance of healthy dependence as well as independence is assessed and evaluated: 'When do you ask for help?' is contrasted with 'When do you trust yourself?'

ENDING AS CHANGE AND CHANCE

There is often a major crisis half-way through the third term for the group, usually after I return. 'We are running out of time!' 'The group is almost over and we have just started!' This usually gives rise to a discussion of missed opportunities, in the group and in life. Some groups are at this point in time able to weigh up the place and function of psychotherapy as a whole. As a rule, at this time, limitations, disappointment and disillusionment are highlighted themes. I make a point of emphasising these concerns as important stepping stones for healthy development and for a realistic and mature attitude to life. If the group is able to grapple with the emotional impact of these subjects, the experience of the experiential group and its process throughout the year can be appreciated as enriching. In the group which has weathered the storms of crisis and conflict and has understood that the group was a chance for change, a sense of achievement and satisfaction arises. Often people are also aware of development and growth in their fellow trainees and these observations can be exchanged, sometimes like gifts in the last few sessions. An awareness of the ending of the experiential group as another change, but also as a further chance, may develop.

In the alchemical process the image of the sexual couple is one of the symbolical representations of the dawning of the third stage, the reddish golden state of the rubedo. It stands for the possibility of birth and new life and the rising of the sun on a new day. The third stage is solid, symbolised by the stone of the philosophers; it is luminous and sparkly, symbolised by the alchemists' gold. It reflects an attitude of achievement, accomplishment and success.

Something bad and smelly – a group is stuck

Sadly, groups do not always work well and the conductor's efforts are not always successful. One of the groups I have run, for instance, was not able to work constructively and develop the common ground for the transformational processes of change I have been describing. The group was very small to begin with, which created great anxiety, because there was enormous fear from the start that the group might not survive. In addition, all my efforts to transform the anti-group factor (Nitsun 1996) into a workable matrix failed. The group never seemed able to create any valid space for thought or reflection, despite long silences. The group never quite gelled to become a group as a whole, but remained a collection of individual bits which were never able to develop into one shared unit able to work together.

Personal resistances and transferences towards other group members and the conductor were strongly negatively coloured. I was experienced as cold and tough. During sessions I regularly experienced extremely intense emotional states due to projective identification. I felt controlled, suffered attacks of fury and murderous rage, and experienced isolating icy contempt, utter despair and helplessness in cyclical repetition, to name only a few of the feelings I experienced. I often developed a headache or other physical symptoms just before or during the sessions and repeatedly struggled in vain to connect with a sense of compassion, for the group members as well as myself. I felt that I had been designated as a bad object and I had to remain one; letting go of it or changing it seemed impossible. Despite all my attempts to tackle this desperate situation I found no way to change it. As became apparent, all members of the group had had somewhat negative therapeutic experiences in the past, but this revelation made no great difference to the group's process as a whole. In the third session before the end of the year people in the group commented: 'The group is coming to an end – has it even started?' 'The group is a pot with a firmly closed lid.' 'There is shit inside it.' 'Something bad and smelly.'

This short portrayal indicates that in fact even this group got off to a start after all, because there was an alchemical vessel, a pot, and it was sealed, the lid was on – a matrix existed. However, the comments also depict that the group was stuck in the first stage of the alchemical nigredo, the first station of this process of psychological change, where things are rotting and decaying. The alchemists called this stage of decomposition and corrosion 'putrefactio'. It seems that after all some kind of work was in progress, the heat was on, but it was work of a particularly stinking and shitty variety, only able to produce unpleasant stenches and disgusting odours, and any step forward out of this foul-smelling hell-hole was blocked, because people were too afraid to move, which could only be acknowledged at the end of the group. The result was that nothing was shifting, projections could not be withdrawn, and the group as a whole could not progress. In the last session one group member said: 'We did not work as a group, there was too much fear.'

Discussion

The paradox of the individual and the group

Winnicott, Jung and Foulkes, whose theories I have used to describe the development of experiential groups, are all struggling to make sense of a phenomenon which is one of the basic dilemmas in understanding human experience. Psychological processes in the individual are enormously complex and even more so are psychological processes in groups – how do you reconcile or even combine the two? Different schools of thought have tried to make sense of one or the other side of the phenomenon; for instance, psychology has over the last two hundred years attempted to explain mental processes in the individual, and sociology has made an effort to define interaction in the social sphere or with the environment.

The complex situation of understanding human experience in relation to individuals and groups has been made even more confusing through the fact that the dilemma has been transferred onto the individual itself by splitting the bio-psychological unit into mind and body. We conceive of ourselves as separate three-dimensional creatures, while we in fact know that the actual world around us is a multi-dimensional one. During the last century the natural sciences have demonstrated that it is not in accordance with reality to think of even inorganic matter in that way, that is, to consider an event in the physical world as separate from any other. A theory which views human beings as being individuals only, that is, separate entities unrelated to each other, has become more and more questionable. Chaos theory (Gleick 1988), for instance, and quantum mechanics (Mansfield 1995) have shown that we live in a universe that is through and through interactional and that all events are in some way interrelated to one another (Bohm 1995).

To think about human experience in a way which does not prioritise either the individual or the social group is extremely difficult, because it requires a viewpoint which is paradoxical and difficult to maintain. It requires an awareness able to keep the balance between the two extremes or 'to hold the

tension of opposites', which are Jung's words to describe the goal of individua-tion (1981, p.200) and which incidentally is also the aim of the alchemical opus (Jung 1980). I hope to be able to make a clarifying contribution to a better understanding of this dilemma.

To demonstrate the needed new viewpoint I want to paraphrase Winnicott's statement, 'There is no such thing as a baby' (1987a, p.99) by changing it provocatively into: there is no such thing as an individual! This is the standpoint promoted by Dalal in *Taking the Group Seriously* (Dalal 1998). Dalal tries to do away with the individual in his attempt to illuminate Foulkes' viewpoint of the group by formulating an understanding of the individual as formed and defined purely by the social. In my opinion his viewpoint turns out to be lopsided and seems to leave one side of the equation out altogether.

However, Winnicott explains his statement that, 'There is no such thing as a baby' with the further declaration '...that if you show me a baby you certainly show me also someone caring for the baby...', concluding with '...the unit is not the individual, the unit is an environment–individual set-up' (1987a, p.99). Following his train of thought, my statement that there is no such thing as an individual also needs to be completed by pointing out that in relation to the individual we are also always dealing with an environment–individual set-up: there is no such thing as an individual, there is always only an environ-ment–individual set-up. Individual and environment are always intricately connected, they constantly interact and define each other in relation to each other.

To make sense of the individual–group dilemma I want to apply Winnicott's famous dictum also in reverse and this would read: 'There is also no such thing as a social world whatsoever. There is always only a social–individ-ual set-up. The social world also does not exist on its own, because the social world itself is composed of and composed by individuals.' In this way Winnicott allows me to define a new understanding of the individual–group paradox, which is, that the group constitutes an environmental factor with regard to the individual in the group, and while the individual is part of the group, it is also contributing to and defining the group through participation in it.

Psychoanalysis has provided a foundation for the understanding of the human psyche during the last century, but I believe it is reaching its limitations when practised with the focus on the individual only in the traditional way. Foulkes, who was one of the founders of group analytic theory and practice, was trying to expand those limitations. He was hampered in his attempt, however, by the disdain and criticism from his former psychoanalytical col-leagues, who could not stomach the implied devaluation of the individual as they saw it. I believe the research into and the development of an understand-ing of human group processes is of such immense importance at this point in time, because the group paradigm is needed to complement our understanding of the individual. Human life is defined by our capacity to communicate and co-operate with each other.

I believe Winnicott's formulation of the mutually interdependent environ-ment–individual set-up describes the practically lived experience of various social units, such as families, groups and communities and also of humanity as a whole. I have described before how the individuals in the group become nodal points within the network of a greater unit, the group as a whole. This can also be applied to the notion of humanity as a whole. We as individuals are all nodal points in the newly established network of humanity as is becoming increas-ingly apparent. One of the obvious examples to demonstrate this today would be the worldwide web. However, each individual in the network as a whole remains an individually recognisable unit or separately identifiable cell with a particular function even as part of this greater organism. Like each cell in an organism, each individual entity has a specific function in the network of the whole. The individual and the group are both real interdependent aspects of one reality.

I hope this shows that the paradox of the group and the individual cannot be resolved, but needs to be perceived as the possible basis for a new under-standing of human experience: 'Paradox...is...fundamental to human life...the individual and the group are paradoxically formed by and forming each other at the same time' (Stacey 2000, p.402). As I have pointed out above, this new paradigm is already widely used and applied for instance in the natural sciences. The recent application to human sciences, as suggested for instance by Stacey (2000) in his theory of complex responsive processes, demands the effort to develop the flexibility and the freedom of at least a bi-focal, if not a multi-focal, point of view, and a realisation that these different points of view are all equally valid. This new viewpoint comprises also, I believe, the capacity to move between a variety of levels of reality. These different levels are not nec-essarily directly accessible to ordinary physical perception, as for instance the symbolic level of alchemy as described above, but can be approached for instance through analogy or metaphor. However, it seems to me that what we call psyche or psychic reality is in itself an example of symbolic reality. Working as psychotherapists we may enter into and inhabit the reality of the psyche in

every session. The concepts of transference and countertransference and other psychological mechanisms could be seen as ways to monitor and record this specific level of reality. They help us to design functional maps enabling us to exchange our growing understanding in communication with others. By using the alchemical model, I believe, we are able to add colour to these charts to make them even clearer and easier to read.

Conclusion

I hope I have been able to show that the experiential groups I have conducted moved during the year of their duration through profound processes of change, in successive phases of loss, recovery, separation and reparation. In the therapeutic profession, which struggles with problems related to competitiveness, status and power, the experiential group experience offers a way of exchange complementary to the isolating work situation in the consulting room through enriching and mutually validating relationships between equals. As I have described, however, it is not always possible to facilitate this process of open communication between equals due to the composition or the context of the group. I have also made the attempt to show that the psychological interpretation of the alchemical process can be used as a tool to locate a group's developmental process in relation to certain transformational stages. In addition I hope I have been able to make a contribution to a new way of understanding and conceptualising a dilemma, which is still perceived as a serious problem leading to misunderstandings in the therapeutic community, by describing the paradox of the individual and the group.

Notes

1. For a detailed elaboration of the establishment of Foulkes' concept of the group matrix in reference to Winnicott's understanding of the development of the individual, see James (1982).
2. For the elaboration of the paranoid psychological state following integration to unit status see 'Anxiety associated with insecurity' in Winnicott (1987a) pp.97–100.
3. The term 'matrix' is derived from the Greek and means 'womb'; for more information see Roberts (1982).
4. For further elucidation of this understanding see 'Fear of breakdown' in Winnicott (1989) pp.87–95.
5. For further elucidation of the term, see 'The use of an object' in Winnicott (1989) pp.217–247.
6. For further elaboration of the alchemical opus see Jung (1980).
7. For an excellent description of projective identification see Rogers (1987).
8. For a description of the shadow see Jung (1979), pp.168–176.
9. For the clinical importance of the oedipal situation for psychological development, see Britton *et al.* (1995).

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