CHAPTER 5

Chaos and Order in the Large Group

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Emergence of a group analytic perspective on the large group

Group analysts tend to agree that in large groups we learn about primitive defence mechanisms, the fear of psychotic fragmentation, the fragility of communication and the socially divisive and destructive potential in the foundation matrix of each culture. The focus of attention in the literature has been on the decivilising and not on the civilising processes within the interactions between social actors in the large group setting (Elias 1976). Despite their differences, Foulkesian and Kleinian thinkers agree that the large group repeatedly fails to learn from experience and almost always regresses into a psychotic state of mind. This negative dialectic between large group, individual member and conductor is so unquestioned that it is the first thing that deserves rethinking.

Foulkes, in his refusal to integrate his work with that of Bion, shaped the understanding of small and large groups in three generations of group analytic practitioners. The founding father of group analysis was traumatised in the Third Reich and dealt with the pain of displacement through the mass and its leader by idealising a smaller version of the group. The pre-war generation of analysts was preoccupied with finding a set of defences against the decivilising monster of fascism. The fascist followers and their seducing, charismatic leaders drove the grandfather of group analysis out of his homeland. Foulkes wanted to create applied models of

psychoanalysis which could act as a sociopsychological vaccine. In Kreeger's classic book on the large group all the contributors have a passion for invoking dialogue in the face of psychic fragmentation and mass-psychosis. They search for more mature social exchanges through the use of the large group (Kreeger 1975). The contributions in the book read as if this task mirrored the labour of Sisyphus. It is as if basic trust had been damaged for this second generation and as if the work in the large group was, in part, serving the function of healing this transgenerational wound (Balint 1968). The impression one gets, rereading the book, is that it is a delusion to think that the genie of human destructiveness can be kept in the bottle through work in small therapy groups alone, so that analysts have a duty to avoid a split between the idealised clinical and denigrated societal settings.

Foulkes' pro-group perspective has effectively influenced the development of a practice for conducting small therapy groups throughout Europe. His description of the group as a matrix of transpersonal relationships and not a dualistic opposition between the individual and collective gives the analyst permission to adapt the method to a range of settings and patient groups. Foulkes' non-dyadic vision of the group took him beyond Freud and Klein and enabled the group-analytic conductor to work simultaneously with the individual, the pair, the subgroup, the whole group and the context (Foulkes 1986). This is celebrated as a freedom from fear in the small group, as consequently its dynamic process does not have to be mastered, merely worked with.

The group-analytic conductor and therapy group are described as being always on the way to widening and deepening communication, though they don't know how to accomplish this task when they set out on their journey of interaction and communicative exchange. Group analysts have sat easy with a Winnicottian style of working with the group as a transitional object and the group process as a transitional space (Winnicott 1971). What group analysts have been very reluctant to do is transfer this open and optimistic attitude towards the healing powers of the group from the small into the large group setting. Almost against their better natures, group analysts have held on to the idea of the 'good' small group and the 'bad' large group. This is a noteworthy pattern which is in need of deconstructing.

In my experience of sitting in large groups as a participant and conductor over the last 15 years I have become convinced that group analysts who practice the art of the large group resort, on the whole, to a non-group-analytic, negative-group perspective in order to master the Freudian and Kleinian dyadic scene of a fused large group wrestling with a lone and heroic conductor. Group-analytic large group conductors knowingly or unknowingly tend to underpin their interpretations and interventions in a large group with Bion's basic assumptions theory or his ideas on thinking and linking (Bion 1962). Unconsciously, this stance brings two gains: by denigrating the large group in comparison with the small group, the latter remains the theoretically unchanging self-object for each group analyst; and by sharing the non-group-analytic assumption that the large group process is condemned to be just frustrating and destructive, group analysts pull back from attacking their founding father, who was profoundly ambivalent about this methodology.

Foulkes tells us very little in his work about the nature and the workings of the large group. He limits himself to saying that we can work with it in the same way as with the small group; and he reveals his fear of mass phenomena by striving to find the image of the group conductor so as to avoid any association with the leader – the embodiment of the seducer of the large group as mass. This dictum left the successor generation with the problem of looking elsewhere for a theory which could be used to make sense of what goes on in a large group. The unclear legacy led to the emergence of two related but radically different positions in the second generation of group analytic thinkers on the large group – both rooted in Bion, not in Foulkes.

Kreeger, for instance has, for a group analyst, an unnecessarily pessimistic view of the kind of social therapy that can be accomplished in the large group. He describes the conductor as a kind of survivor who appears to be as helpless in relation to the large group as the Kleinian mother is in the face of the death instinct inside the newborn baby. His thinking on the large group process draws imaginatively and creatively on Bion's work on basic assumptions and object relations ideas about pre-oedipal fears and inter-personal defences. Pat de Maré, on the other hand, made use of Bion's theory of thinking in his book *Koinonia*, and begins to overcome the split between the good and benign small group, with its tendency towards integration and relatedness, and the bad and malignant large group with

its propensity for disintegration and fragmentation (de Maré *et al.* 1991). He argues that the large group frustrates the satisfaction of libidinal needs and thereby causes hate in and between the participants. Resentment builds up and then finds a channel for expression in subgroups, which contain the hate, and turn it into the desire to think and speak. Through dialogue between the subgroups hate is transformed into frustration, which is, according to Bion, the precondition for thinking and linking (Bion 1967). De Maré thinks that a large group can weave a holding matrix between differing subgroups and develop the capacity for human fellowship. It is this capacity that makes the large group an ideal setting for working through historical trauma and intergroup conflict.

The second generation of Foulkesian large group conductors were split between overly optimistic and pessimistic views of large group work. Kreeger and de Maré accepted their group analytic inheritance, consolidated it and developed a large group tradition beyond the father. They ended up in the roles of competing siblings and have handed the current generation a clear choice: to attach to de Maré's model of using large groups to help deepen and widen democracy and fellowship in society; to follow Kreeger in his quest to work more consciously with the pathology that is part of the unconscious interactions within society; or, to work simultaneously, in the moment as it were, with co-operation and rivalry, order and chaos. The previous generation worked with the unfulfilled dream of the founder to apply analytic thinking in society. We now have the chance to integrate the work of the grandparents, Bion and Foulkes, and the parents, de Maré and Kreeger. Morris Nitsun paved the way for this integrative work by his de-idealisation of the small group object (Nitsun 1996). I would turn his thesis of the small group being not just good and healing, but also bad and destructive, on its head. I want to free group analysts up for the thought that the large group is not just bad and psychosis-inducing, but potentially a good and nurturing object at times (Wilke 1999). We can open a thinking space for working with the propensity for chaos and order in any group, not just the small one.

The symbolic construction of social order and chaos

The iconoclastic way Foulkes looked at the components which structure a group allows group analysts to treat the group as a social and psychological space, not simply as a fused 'as if' individual. Group analysts challenge the artificial dichotomy between individual and group, and society and citizen, so prevalent in the work of classical philosophy and psychoanalysis. Foulkes and Elias gave us an insight into how the individual, the group and society are inseparably connected by means of translucent boundaries. Individual, pair, subgroup, whole group and context can only be understand as a process where the pattern of the interaction, not the separateness of each component, is the focus of understanding – just as the relationship between mother and baby, not their separate identities, is at the core of Winnicott's thinking (Winnicott 1990).

This way of seeing implies that the conductor cannot be confined to confronting the group with its social defences but must open up spaces for the emergence of a sense of interdependence and social connectedness. A large-group conductor who tries to remain a classical analyst, as he struggles to keep an aloof position, and treats the group as a projective myth pays a heavy theoretical and practical price. By reducing the social process of the group to a defensive fantasy against reality he reduces the group members to actors on a dyadic stage which is pluralistic and complex. So, the way a conductor classifies the interactions within the large group shapes the way that reality is perceived, worked with and interpreted.

The anthropologist Edmund Leach argued that a myth constitutes lived reality, not an ideological or psychological rationalisation of it (Leach 1969). Human beings are compulsive classifiers and meaning-makers, and each encounter in a sociopsychological space turns into a ritualised exchange which, through the interaction of the participants, ends in a re-statement of the cosmological order of the belonging group. This dramatisation of social order contains the potential for regression, affirmation and renewal, and draws on the collective cultural, social and psychological memory which those present embody. In that sense it matters absolutely whether the conductor has a dyadic (pre-Foulkesian) or pluralistic (Foulkesian) view of the group process.

In a tribal society aristocratic and religious authorities function to help accomplish the journey through a social space-and-time continuum. In a

large group, the group analytic conductor can function as a transitional being in the same way by attempting to contain the space for the emergence of regressive and psychotic forces. If both ends of this tension spectrum are held in the conductor's mind, then reassuring re-enactments of familiar ways of talking together, as well as disturbing and novel patterns of relating, doing and being can emerge in most large groups.

If we transfer the group analytic view of the group conductor as dynamic administrator, translator and analyst to the large group setting, then we will be set free to explore psychological, sociological and historical issues in a regressive and reflexive space. The complexity of this role description means that the conductor must separate from the detached position and adopt, like an anthropologist, the role of a participant observer in a network of transference and counter-transference relationships, embedded in a historical and cultural context. The conductor in the large group has to enact the role of the analyst, the participant observer and the 'individual member'. Writers on the large group have neglected the significance of the psychosocial methods we all use in groups to create the social order we hold on to, in order to cope with the tension involved in retaining a sense of self whilst also accepting our interdependence. Significant numbers in a large group retain the ability to see the positive function of our seemingly pathological social and personal defences against the underlying anxiety of sharing the group with others. With the help of this significant subgroup, the conductor can connect work with the push for order and the pull towards chaos in the large group through the triangulation of psychoanalysis, group analysis and social anthropology.

Social anthropologists show how tribal groups need rituals, leaders and symbolic gift exchanges to structure the transition from one social and cultural state of being to another. A large group has similar needs during its development, and we can regard projection, splitting and projective identification as defences against anxieties, and attempts at communication which need to be accepted and contained. A large group member who is desperate enough to engage in self-destructive patterns of feeling and thinking relates to others in the position of a delinquent who expresses the hope of contact and holding (Winnicott 1968). Such a person seeks to prevent a repetition of the original trauma and looks for an object which can respond to his real inner self, without recourse to persecution and demands for submission.

In the same act of provocation and disconnection, the group member seeks assurance, recognition and social connectedness. The conductor needs to see the attack not just as envious but also as a gift, designed to facilitate the construction of a matrix of interdependence, in which members secure their positions by the obligation to return projective gifts. The act of exchanging projections itself carries the implied message that the group is felt to be containing and deserves basic trust. Group members who present as being at the edge are unconsciously used by the large group to reassure itself of its capacity for sanity. In response, the conductor is called upon to model a form of blind trust in the free associative process, and give the group the feeling that it can accomplish the transition from a state of disconnectedness to re-connectedness.

The conductor creates a space for an experience of environmental mothering that can have a civilising influence both on the group culture and on each individual member. By trusting in the vacillation of the group process between order and disorder, the analyst can help the group integrate destructive forms of exchange through dialogue and the acknowledgement of interdependence. If this toleration of the good and the bad in the relationship with the object can be repeatedly internalised, then the large group will, like society itself, hold and affirm the integrity and the sense of fragmentation in the same act of communication and exchange.

Large group practice

In society we live suspended in psychosocial webs of meaning which we weave ourselves through our daily interactions. These invisibly connected group-webs make up our culture. Group analysts try to create a translucent boundary between the individual, the group matrix and the societal foundation matrix, so as to nurture attempts at recovering the work-group function in the large group or keep hope alive in its constituent subgroups. The following case illustrates how the unconscious mind of the different subgroups within a large group begins to exchange undigested psychic material and dramatise cultural and historical patterns of relating, in a way that is both novel and affirming.

An architect whose parents are concentration camp survivors embraced the fate of being a 'memorial candle' (Wardi 1992). In this role

he has not really been able to create his own true self but serves the memory of his lost relatives through reparative work which his own parents are unable to accomplish. He asked me to participate in a project designed to highlight the fact that the second largest Jewish community in Germany still did not have a synagogue 45 years after the end of the war. The community itself was reluctant to settle in a place associated with the mass murder of their own relatives. The local political élite had given the community a piece of land in the Sixties and promised large subsidies for the construction of a community centre and place of worship. This piece of prime real-estate held a secret. Under the ground lay the bunker for the Nazi élite, designed to let them carry on their work whilst the Allies bombed the city. A surveyor's report showed that the cost of removing the bunker would be greater than that of building a new synagogue. Nothing happened for almost 30 years. The community built a car park on the land, made money for its coffers, and attracted the publicity and exposure it feared by creating an eyesore in the middle of the historic town centre.

In the early Nineties three things changed: my client was driven yet again to build another synagogue; a new head of town planning wanted to re-open the case and look with fresh eyes at the project; the newly elected president of the community, herself a survivor, decided that the synagogue should be built on top of the bunker – thereby symbolically signifying the community's survival. Public awareness was raised through an unusual architectural project. The final-year students from two architecture schools in Germany and Israel were invited to visit the site, interview the locals and the Jewish community, consult with the planners and then submit designs for a new synagogue. When the consultation process had ended and the designs were in first draft form, the two student bodies met for a workshop. Integral to this training event was a large group that took place in the cafeteria of the university. The seating area for the students was built like a Roman amphitheatre in the shape of a triangle with three tiers of seating and an empty space in the middle.

The group comprised about 65 students and four professors. After a short introduction in which I stated that we were here to explore the emotional aspects of the encounter with the site, the task and each other, there was a short silence. As I wondered what the effect on the group would be of sitting in an oedipal triangle, the caretaker of the building stormed into the hall. He somehow sensed that I was the leader, although I

was one among many sitting in the triangle. He started shouting at me: 'Do you have official permission for this illegal assembly? Wait until the Director gets to hear of this… Get out… I will call the Director now… Don't move… It is disgusting… I never know what is going on in this place!'

I did nothing and waited.

There was a very brief stand off between the caretaker and the group. Most of the group turned away and stared into the empty space in the centre of the seating area. Suddenly a German professor stood up and started to shout back: 'Of course we have permission, you stupid fool! Stop bothering us. Do your own work and leave us to do ours.'

The caretaker went away in a huff. The professor sat down, his whole body shaking. There was another short silence. The group looked stunned and mesmerised. Another staff member started speaking about the task in hand and wondered whether a synagogue was any different from building a mosque or a church in modern Germany. Another person said that he was just going to design an empty building which could also be a fire station, what the community did with it was their business. They, not he, had to give meaning to the space. He was willing merely to design it. The words 'fire station' were a trigger for another student to say that this project was different, that a synagogue in Germany could never be viewed as a neutral construction. Too many of them had been consumed by fire during *Kristallnacht* in 1938.

The group carried on working like this. It became clear that splits were opening up around whether the design for this synagogue should resemble a modernist, functional and rational construction or take on the shape of an emotional, historically rooted holocaust memorial. These two paradigms established themselves very firmly and were not shifted for a long time. Towards the end of the session a third perspective emerged. An in-between subgroup thought that both the modernist and memorial perspective needed to be reflected in the design of this building. The difference between these ways of seeing seemed to be shaped by the influence of childhood experience. The subgroup who wanted to build a memorial to the holocaust victims had parents who had talked about their wartime suffering; the subgroup who wanted to exclude the history of persecution from the design of the building came from families who had remained silent. The in-between group of students seemed freer to choose

their response in the here and now. As they were not aware of any shameful or traumatised family past they had responded in an empathic way to the holocaust story during their secondary education.

Though it was comfortable to find this neat fit between the design and inner history of Germans and Jews via the family or the school, the really significant event took place at the boundary of the group. While we were working on the emotional dimensions of designing a synagogue, the caretaker assembled his team and started to move furniture around us in a bizarre and mindless way for the remainder of the session. In a synchronic sequence, they ended their re-arrangement in such a way that by the end of the group the furniture was back in its original position. Almost simultaneously with the end of the group, the noise surrounding and uniting us, stopped. I was left with just sufficient quiet time to thank everyone and summarise the major patterns which had emerged during the session. Everyone got up looking like Munch's scream and full of dis-ease about the power of the social unconscious, which had driven them to sit in a public forum surrounded by people who had regressed into what Bollas has called a fascist state of mind and re-dramatised the traumatic scene between the Nazis and their enemies – the Jews and intellectuals (Bollas 1987). By moving the furniture they attacked thinking and wanted to reduce all of us to a state of mindlessness in which the unthinkable could be re-enacted.

This case material gives us a glimpse of the way in which inner object relations determine re-enactment and reparation processes. The group process revealed how attempts to integrate the disconnected parts of the past in the individual and group mind is subject to destructive and recreative forces. The work group, sitting inside the boundary, worked on reparation and recreation; the basic assumption group, beyond the boundary, worked on envy and re-dramatisation. What seemed to be an unrelated meeting of a work group and its envious enemies became a shared experience in a common social universe. Boundary events surrounding a group process signify the attempt to connect what is internal and external: what can be kept in mind and what needs to be expelled from it. The dis-ease between the group of intellectuals forming the work group inside the boundary, and the group of alienated labourers embodying a very primitive group outside the boundary, re-dramatised the trauma between perpetrators, victims, resisters and bystanders. The synchronicity

of the encounter showed that the group process always has the potential to widen and deepen the civilising and decivilising forces. I regard the group of architects and the surrounding group of caretakers as part of the same societal figuration, given the ground of a shared and traumatising history. The inner subgroup struggled with reparation and social order; the outer subgroup displayed a valence for disturbance, loss of social control and subservience to a pathological leader.

Delinquency can be a sign of hope and must not be mistaken for the psychotic act itself. This delinquent subgroup fused in a relentless, timeless and envious attack, but simultaneously expressed its desire to belong and be connected. The attacking subgroup ultimately wanted to be tolerated and was clinging to a holding environment which could tolerate the pain, loss and incomplete mourning contained in its own social unconscious. The conducted large group symbolised the official public dialogue about the inheritance of the Third Reich, with its focus on guilt and reparation. In contrast, the destructive outer group represented the hidden trauma of the failed dependency, the incomplete mourning and the valence for envy on the part of the victim contained in the psychological inheritance bestowed upon the children of the perpetrators (Hopper 1997).

Conclusion

The large group process confronts us with the fact that civilising and decivilising processes are as inseparable as regression and progression. It makes sense to integrate preventative and curative models in large group work. Paradoxically, globalisation has disembedded cultural boundaries sufficiently to allow us to work with our common humanity much more openly, and it has re-awakened the human propensity to secure a group identity by denigrating the neighbouring stranger (Giddens 1999). The large group not only frustrates the satisfaction of libidinal needs and causes hate, but also opens up spaces for containment and development between individuals and a variety of subgroups. In the large group hate is transformed into the capacity to be frustrated when some of its members begin to feel heard and reconnected. As the capacity to tolerate frustration increases, so does the ability to think reflectively. The push for thinking and linking becomes as strong as the pull towards fragmentation and disintegration within the evolving group matrix. The conductor's perspective

of the large group process as primarily pathological or as a balance of destructive and creative forces will significantly shape the experience of the process for the members, as well as determining how the case is analysed and presented.

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