

SOME ASPECTS OF LARGE GROUP FUNCTIONING

or

HOW I FELT AND WHAT I LEARNED AT THE INTERNATIONAL COLLOQUIUM OF GROUP ANALYSIS, LONDON, JULY, 1975

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In an editorial note (GAIPAC, October 1975, VIII/3, p.184) S.H.F., commented on the existence of a "Large Group" at the Colloquium, and on the fact that the reports provided concentrated on the "intellectual part of the discussion". This report is a reflection on some of the less rational aspects of the meeting.

As described by Dr. Josafat (ibid., p.177), and Dr. Leal (ibid. p.199), from the outset there seemed to be a (confused?) desire at the Colloquium for participation and experience of some sort. The opposition to "dry lecturing" was stated very early by R. Hobdell. However, there was some uncertainty about how best members could participate constructively. At one point the chairman put some questions to us. Were these meant as rhetoric? If not, which members and how many are to reply? Rapidly a conflict developed between the urge to make things happen and the wish to let things happen. Dr. Lionel Kreeger enunciated this dilemma when he told us that he was asking himself "should I intervene?". The conflict appeared as polarized attitudes on various and sometimes trivial matters e.g., should speakers stand or sit while talking to the meeting, should people be constrained to logical follow-on to the previous speaker or should responses be free. Letting things happen implies trust and hope and I found it rather nice that the sitting versus standing controversy resolved itself by people doing as they wished and, if it was unsuitable, bowing to the wishes of participants who complained to them that they were inaudible.

To restate the issue: did individual members of this large group need their behaviour controlled by verbalized dictate, or could the problem of rules for personal functioning be solved mainly non-verbally and indirectly via mutual understanding and cooperation.

Meanwhile the Scientific content of the meeting had moved to references to psychosis and schizophrenia and I recalled that R.D. Scott (Schizophrenia Bulletin, 1974, No. 10 p. 58-73) had observed the particular status of the adjective "controlling" in describing schizophrenics and their family members. This complemented my thoughts and I began to think that what was seriously affecting those organizing the Colloquium as well as the participants was anxiety over control... in particular, letting things happen loosed these anxieties. I had recently been chairman of a similar large group in a loosely-structured discussion and I had a feeling for it from that side: the responsibility of the organizers and their

self-esteem etc., were important. But now the basis of the anxiety of the participants was becoming clearer to me. There are two basic ways that anxieties over control may be dealt with: the first is via splitting, and we had already seen polarization occurring, and the second is via intrusive or external control e.g., by asking a question.

Towards the end of the first session I made the above points with a little more embellishment using evidence from earlier speakers and suggested that although the meeting was going along as if everyone was having a good (interesting, gratifying) experience, at some level it also seemed to be a bad (frustrating, irritating) experience. I remarked on the difficulty in being aware of and tolerating both feelings. This comment was followed rapidly by confirmation as one speaker spoke in advocacy of relinquishing control, and others remarked on the fear of the psychotic experience. Robin Skynner stated he was bored and having a bad experience, while others replied they were enjoying it. Finally came requests for a program and a chairman (intrusive external control) and for splitting into small groups.

Although we split into smaller groups, they contained 20-30 persons and remained psychically closer to "large groups"; and the same phenomena could be seen repeating themselves. The problems of the participants became clearer. The normal control mechanisms that can be used in a one-to-one interaction (e.g., close inspection, feed-back, physical control &c) are adaptable to use in a small group situation, and in addition silence, watching secretly, taking over and others are especially useful for feeling in control in the group situation. In both it is possible to rapidly get to know and monitor the "other" for safety and self-confirmation, and participation is inevitable. By contrast the large group does not provide such opportunity for control, and it is in addition a depriving experience. It frustrates needs for intimacy, needs for centrality (narcissistic input), and needs for individuality (delineation of identity). With more space I would elaborate this "mechanical" sentence and do the idea justice. But, to continue: with limited participation complexity of utterance becomes reduced and misunderstandings flourish as the normal corrective feed-back opportunities are unavailable. This, combined with the feelings of helplessness/anxieties re loss of control and the high level of (mainly unconscious) frustration which needs to be tolerated means that regression is inevitable. At a certain point the frustration becomes traumatizing and there is no alternative but to act on the environment. This action can be seen to be attempts to control split off parts of the self or externalized inner objects but I do not wish to go further in this theoretical vein. It leads to analytic understanding of the feelings of boredom, the tendency to disintegration and dissatisfaction, and the use of the charismatic leader in large groups. The responses to entrapment by a bad object of which one is a part (member of large group) are also worthy of further investigation, and have particular contemporary relevance.

While there was some suggestion that an oedipal situation

(attack on the father) with respect to S.H.F. was developing, I could not see much evidence for this. S.H.F. did come in for some criticism, but he acknowledged being "provocative". However, splitting mechanisms were much in evidence and clearly compulsive. The relatively mild aggression which occurred was more obviously a result of this. Thus there was much discussion, both during the formal meetings and over cups of tea, about which course of action was right and which wrong, what would make a good meeting and what a bad one, whether the experience was gratifying or frustrating. Most were on one side or the other or mildly confused: I found myself having extreme difficulty in not taking sides at times and it affected my capacity to think. There was similarly a compulsive tendency to agree or disagree with others. Alongside this polarization went a lot of talk about dichotomization and its evils! Participants who, if seen on their own would both advocate and demonstrate tolerance seemed to be prejudiced within the large group. The splitting, when unconscious, was destructive and interfered with learning: in response to one member who had described the first session as "arid", I replied that the emotional experience may have been so, but the day certainly was not. It was interesting that the splitting mechanism (as manifested in dichotomization for example) was bitterly attacked, with someone noting that it seemed to be a perennial horse for flogging, but little sympathetic comment about splitting was made. It is very human after all.

I do not think the above comments embody anything original, and I have since discovered Pierre Turquet's chapter in The Large Group - but for me it was new.

So I would like to conclude with thanks and gratitude to the G.A.S. organizers of the Colloquium, and a Muslim prayer:

"Oh Lord, help us bear that which we cannot bear"

The Large Group.

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