A Consultant's Journey into the Large Group Unconscious

Principles and Techniques

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The other within

'The unconscious is the discourse of the other,' Lacan tells us (1977, p.439). His voice is one of many within the relational and intersubjective perspectives, in which the other is accorded a prominent and central position. Unlike traditional psychoanalytic thinking and its emphasis on individual wholeness, separateness and integrity, in these postmodern perspectives the boundaries between the self and other are quite fluid and permeable, if not messy, and there is 'no neat line between the two – because otherness inhabit and constitute the individual' (Sampson 1993a, p.52). Similarly, Verhaeghe explains the meaning of Lacan's position as 'Identity is always outside with the Other or, more precisely, in the particular relation to this Other' (1997, p.99).

I would like to demonstrate my subjective understanding of this theoretical position by sharing my reactions and fantasies about writing this piece; after all, writing can be construed as participation in a large group experience with members in the mind. I recall very vividly my passionate internal response to the two male Israeli editors, Professor Schneider and Dr Weinberg, who dared to ask me to contribute a chapter to this book. I was furious with both of them because I was convinced that they were

going through the motions, and could not possibly be genuine and sincere about their request. Furthermore, since the whole world knows about my writing inhibitions, they expected me to say no, and then would feel morally superior for having considered a Palestinian woman for such a task. I was almost certain that Malcolm Pines was the mastermind behind this request and that they were unable to refuse him. After the dust settled, I realized that I had had a similar set of reactions to writing an article for the Washington School of Psychiatry newsletter about co-leading the large group in Jerusalem 2000. In that article, I wrote: 'My initial response was a mixture of excitement and trepidation, hopeful irony and suspicion, caution and courage. Many questions, however, came to mind, among them: what was the underlying motivation behind pairing a Palestinian Israeli American woman with a Jewish American man? Was this choice indicative of a superficial and politically correct showcasing of triumphant diversity or was it a genuine and authentic attempt for collaborative and equal partnership? What are the inter-/intra-organizational political dynamics surrounding such a decision? Am I going to be truly authorized, or am I going to be used as a token so the school will look good? And most important, would it be at all possible for me to follow Bion's golden rule of entering every group without memory or desire while working in Jerusalem at this particular time with its intense symbolic representations in the minds of many?' (Jarrar 2001, p.1).

Voice and visibility

How are these thoughts relevant to our subject matter? Is there wisdom in disclosing such intimate details? What are the possible dangers of doing so? Apparently there is a parallel between my experience and that of group members and consultants as they consider self-revelation or hiding in silence in the group. Members and consultants alike do indeed struggle with what and how much to say to whom, and when. If they reveal too much, they may risk exposure, humiliation and shame. If they remain withdrawn and silent, they may risk becoming isolated, marginalized, paralyzed and uninvolved. Ultimately, to what extent is one capable of intimate engagement and connection with others in a rather public setting and why is that so troublesome to us in our times? The Greek conscious-ness of self, Bakhtin (1981) informs us, was not bound with artificial

dichotomies of private and public, internal and external; that is, 'There is no mute or invisible core to the individual himself; he is entirely visible and audible…a mute internal life, a mute grief, mute thought, were completely foreign to the Greek' (p.134). Bakhtin concludes that essentially a 'conversation with one's own self turns directly into a conversation with someone else, without a hint of any necessary boundaries between the two' (p.134). To some extent, the proliferations of TV and radio talk shows in America and other parts of the world may be indicative of our wish to bridge the gap between our private and public worlds.

How these conflicts between self-revelation and silence are resolved by the membership has direct bearing on the pace and rhythms of the group. Undoubtedly, the attitude and comfort level of the consultants with self-disclosure affects the depth and breadth of members' experience. If the consultant does not model being an 'Individual Member,' using Turquet's (1975) term, it is unlikely that members will self-actualize and realize their own specific subjectivity as they also acknowledge their intersubjective experience. Therefore, my self-revealing is used to illustrate not only the prominence of the Kleinian schizoid-paranoid position when genuine dialogue is absent, but also the centrality of identity politics and the importance of its exploration in the large group. My desire as a large group consultant is to help members to become aware of their internal dialogues with the imagined other and transform them into an external and authentic dialogue with the real other. I strongly believe that it is through rigorous and painstaking engagement that the possibility of knowing, understanding and recognizing the specificity, particularity and uniqueness of both the self and the other emerges. This is, in my view, the essence of large group work. The large group provides members with opportunities to explore and learn about the difficulties we all have, as subjects, in recognizing other subjects as 'equivalent centers of experience' and enabling a move towards enhancing capacities for mutual recognition in the group. The daunting task of the consultant is to create a culture such that 'Where objects were, subjects must be' (Benjamin 1999, p.184).

Identity and diversity

Examination of one's group identities in relation to others' group identities is anxiety-provoking and threatening, particularly in a large group setting

which is a close approximation to the world we live in. I believe that the consultant's willingness and capacity to enter the large group experience aware of different aspects of the self, making them available for use in service of the task, furthers the development of dialogue. Understanding the psychological impact of nationality, gender, race, culture, religion, history, biases, allegiances, ideology, political positions, on the way she assumes her role is essential. Flexibility, elasticity and transparency influence our reading of the group and our capacity to work with the tension, uncertainty, dialectic and contradictions. It is also important to register the theories she uses to inform her work, as well as our idiosyncratic ways of internalizing, modifying and transforming such influences.

Our suspicion, ambivalence and reluctance to show our vulnerable, unstable and shifting identities is quite understandable, knowing that primitive group defenses are used to manage anxieties and inadequacies. Such mechanisms of denial, avoidance, splitting, projective and introjective identifications abound. The evil, ugly, oppressive, weak, powerless characterize the Not Me Group or the other, while the good, healthy, beautiful, powerful, sane describe the Me Group. Clearly, locating and purging the repugnant and unacceptable parts of the group self into and onto the other has been very costly; the license we have used to justify and legitimize the many dreadful atrocities we commit. It is not surprising that de Maré (1975, 1991) views the function of the large group as an effort at humanizing society.

Morrison (1992) captures the very essence of how one group, in this case white Americans, has used another, African Americans, as a container for all the disavowed parts of the group self. She refers to this process as 'Africanism.' She writes, 'Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny' (p.52). Similar dynamics are present between men and women; Palestinians and Israelis; colonized and colonizers; heterosexuals and homosexuals – and the list goes on.

Another problem that we may encounter in naming and working diversity and identity dynamics is the question of voice and visibility of oppressed minority subgroups and their individual members, and their relation to the mainstream dominant group. What voices are

permitted/excluded, and on behalf of which group? Can minority members express their subjective life experiences without the dominant group silencing their presence? O'Leary argues that 'The highest moral value of postmodernism lies in its quest to give expression to the disempowered' (2001, p.479). However, Sampson cautions us about the limitation of accommodating such voices since they do not bring fundamental and transformative changes in the existing arrangements of power. He states: '...Merely to have a speaking part is still not to have one's own group's interests, point of view, or specificity represented in a genuine dialogue. If, in order to be heard, I must speak in ways that you have proposed, then I can be heard only if I speak like you, not like me. Rather than being an equal contributor, I remain enclosed in a discursive game that ensures your continuing advantage...this condition does not reflect mere chance but rather reflects the operation of the power of those in charge to dictate the terms by which psychological and social reality will be encountered' (1993b, p.1220).

These are precisely the challenges we have to deal with in the large group. Holding and containing all voices, central and marginal alike, is an art. However, sustainable development of an authentic dialogue may be impeded by subtle and insidious attempts at denigrating and negating the 'different inferior other.' As has been indicated by Skolnick, 'While group membership is essential to a viable self, group processes continually present threats to the experience of a stable positive identity' (2000, p.135). I take Turquet's (1975) views one step further by suggesting that threats to group identity as well as individual identity are at stake in the large group. I enter the group with multiple group identities, in which I am simultaneously female, American, Israeli, Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, psychologist, consultant, victim, victimizer, etc., with some aspects of my identity in the foreground and others in the background. I must be aware and reflective of my internal space in which the different parts co-exist side by side or on top of each other, available to be pulled or pushed by group pressures. This is also true for the members, who bring in their multiple selves with all their inherent complexity. The different parts of the group self are not necessarily in a harmonious relationship with each other and at times conflicts and tensions may be present. One dimension or another may take center stage in our relatedness to others and will 'hijack' all other aspects of the self. Maalouf, an eminent Lebanese-French novelist, posits

that there is always some sort of hierarchy among the elements that constitutes individual identities, yet that hierarchy is not immutable, and it changes with time. He also stresses that identity is made up of a number of allegiances and affiliations. He argues that the allegiance under attack invades the person's whole identity and eclipses all other aspects of the self. He says: 'but whether he accepts or conceals it, proclaims it discretely or flaunts it, it is with that allegiance that the person concerned identifies,... other people who share the same allegiance sympathise; they all gather together, join forces, encourage one another, challenge the other side. For them, asserting their identity inevitably becomes an act of courage, of liberation' (2000, p.26). These are the struggles of individuals and identity subgroups as they face the desirable and undesirable elements of themselves and each other. How do they order these elements? What aspects of identity and which subgroups assume prominent positions, and why, become fertile ground for generating hypotheses about what is happening in the group and in society.

It is noteworthy that privileging identity politics in large group discourse might be surprising, unfamiliar and, to some, simply irrelevant, particularly to members representing dominant and mainstream subgroups, i.e. white American heterosexual males. Yet, those who have suffered from marginalization, oppression, disenfranchisement, and exploitation, the voiceless ones, tend to be hyper-aware and at one with those very dimensions of their identity as primary constituents of the self and their impact on every aspect of their being. Consequently and ironically, different members of the latter group can emerge as visible leaders and exert noticeable influence as their voices become distinct, loud and clear. However, a significant difficulty is that members of oppressed groups may feel the pressure and burden of representation. Therefore, it is important to investigate group differences and sanction and affirm differentiation from one's own subgroup. While this experience might be enriching and a cause for celebration to some, for many others it can be disorienting at best and terrifying at worst. In fact, the large group becomes the arena for each subgroup to highlight, work through and repair transgenerational traumas suffered by its members, such as slavery, holocaust, colonization, immigration, etc. Competition for who has been most oppressed is a central part of the dialogue. In fact, it tends to be delivered in the form of monologues, particularly in the beginning stages

of the group. The main challenge then is to transform monologues into dialogical encounters.

Developing dialogue

The use of the concept 'dialogue' in contrast to 'study' in describing the task of the large group demonstrates a significant shift in conceptualizing the primary purpose of the large group. While the focus is still on experiential learning, there is an explicit message suggesting the importance of engaging across various boundaries as a desirable way to learn and understand the self and its relation to the other. Clearly, in order to have a conversation that can possibly lead to mutual understanding, we assume the presence of 'at least "different other"' who is equally interested in talking and listening and possibly learning about differences. Sampson affirms that what is most essential about human nature is its 'dialogic quality.' He states that 'people's lives are characterized by the ongoing conversations and dialogues they carry out in the course of their everyday activities, and therefore the most important thing about people is not what is contained within them, but what transpires between them' (1993a, p.20). It is safe to assume that he favors the interpersonal, intersubjective and relational perspective with its emphasis on conversation, and rejects what he terms the 'self-celebratory monologic' (p.4) view that dominates Western theories about human nature. The prevalence of inter-group conflict, both nationally and internationally, has contributed to the emergence of dialogue as the buzzword of the 90s. The message suggests the importance of active engagement across various boundaries as a desirable vehicle for learning and understanding more about the self in relation to the other. Without doubt, learning through dialogue is most difficult. It entails making ourselves available to genuine and authentic dialogue with each other in the here and now, rather than the there and then. To do so, members are asked to look at themselves and their relationships to other fellow members, up close and personal. It is the primary responsibility of the consulting team, therefore, to provide a safe and good enough container within which members are free to explore, play, and learn about the world within, the world outside and the world between the self and the other as it emerges in the group.

Through our dialogical encounters, we may discover our own subjectivity and the subjectivities of those whom we objectify and denigrate by our biases, prejudices and projections. The value and universal usefulness of this method of learning is endorsed by modern philosophers of education, such as Paulo Freire. In his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he asserts 'every human being...is capable of looking critically at the world in dialogical encounters with others' (1970, p.14). He also states, 'man's ontological vocation...is to be a Subject who acts upon and transforms the world, and in so doing moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively' (pp.12–13). Freire understood the value and power of speech. As we engage in a conversation, 'the word takes on new power. It is no longer an abstraction or magic but a means by which man discovers himself and his potential as he gives names to things around him...each man wins back his right to *say his own word, to name the world' (p.13)*.

The task of the consulting team is to create and foster an atmosphere that facilitates and encourages sustainable and active development of dialogue between and among individuals and subgroups. Widening the circle of particpation and inclusion of diverse voices is a desirable and worthy goal. The emphasis is on dialogical encounters, in which participants discover their own unique subjectivities and in turn discover that of the 'others.'

Large groups in context

In the Group Relations tradition, a brochure describes the task of each event offered, including the large group. The large group task is generally defined as the study of its own behavior in the here and now in a setting where group size reduces the opportunities for face-to-face interaction. Rioch (1970) explained that the large group provides members with possibilities to experience and deal with 'situations in which sides are taken spontaneously, existing subgroups adhere and split, other factions are formed for apparently rational reasons, and the individual can suddenly feel bereft of support' (p.348).

More recently, trainees receive a brief description of the task of the large group, which reads as follows: 'The large group is composed of all conference members. Its stated task is to develop a dialogue that illumi-

nates group process as it happens and to identify covert barriers to communication. Its aim is to increase understanding of the impact of societal and subgroup dynamics, such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, class, professional discipline and status on the process of the small and large study groups and the conference as a whole. The large group provides an opportunity to give voice to the kind of contextual forces that most often exert a strong but silent influence on our psychotherapy groups.'

In conferences that feature the large group as part of the program, it is important to adapt the task of the large group to the theme of the conference as a whole. By so doing, the contextual framework and the theme of the conference are highlighted as an immediate experience, which influences the shared narrative the membership and consulting team co-create. I believe that this method gives participants a chance to relate more closely to the theoretical material presented so they may become more vital and connected with themselves and each other.

For example, I began the first large group session at a conference entitled 'Women's Power – Women's Passion: from Accommodation to Agency' by reading the primary task of the large group, followed by a few suggestive remarks about the nature of participation in large groups. I explained that this experience might be unfamiliar to many, and in general it is quite a challenge for each individual member to find their own unique voice and still be in contact with another member and the group as a whole. I asked that the members be available and in tune with what they were experiencing from moment to moment, both internally and in relation to others, and find a way to speak to it, regardless of the imperfection of the formulation. Participants were also invited to incorporate the theme of the conference and notice where they positioned themselves in relation to it. I believe that this gentle introduction of the task to the members had a significant impact on group development and set the stage for broader and deeper levels of relatedness and interaction among participants. The task was stated as follows: 'Under-representation of women in positions of power and authority is quite evident throughout our local, national and international organizations. This experiential workshop will engage participants in an authentic dialogue with each other in a large group. It will focus on the unique challenges and dilemmas women encounter in claiming their power and authority, the fantasies, myths and unconscious fears about women's power and influence, and the internal

and external barriers to assuming visible leadership roles in our organizations and communities. We will also highlight the hidden and contextual forces underlying women's inhibitions in exercising authority, including real and imagined threats.'

The question arises as to why I am dwelling on the detailed description of the task and setting in which the large group takes place. The short answer is, because the task might be viewed as a condensation of the theoretical and practical principles involved in conducting large groups. It also reflects my biases, assumptions, and desires as I take up this particular role. Furthermore, I am attempting to highlight the shifts that occur in conducting such groups. I will say a few words about these developments. First, context is a key element in understanding what goes on in the group. I acknowledge the importance of socio-political and cultural forces in shaping my subjective experience and its interaction with the subjectivities of other members, and how it guides and informs my understanding and interpretation of group dynamics (see de Maré 1975; Foulkes 1975). I have embraced the intersubjective theory outlined by Stolorow, Brandchaft and Atwood (1987) and more recently by Orange, Atwood and Stolorow (1997). This perspective and its emphasis on working contextually is particularly relevant to the large group, where the contextual forces are inherently under microscopic examination. Interpretations are geared towards linking the material emerging in the group with what might be going on in society, at both micro and macro levels. Focusing on socio-political and cultural context can be jarring to those who tend to look solely at intra- and inter-psychic processes. However, this approach is in keeping with the statement by Orange *et al.*: 'Thinking contextually means ongoing sensitivity and relentless attention to a multiplicity of contexts – developmental, relational, gender-related, cultural and so on' (1997, p.476). This contextual field is composed of our multiplicity of selves, history, personality, and the imprints of the various theories we have internalized over the years. Now more than ever before we recognize the importance of deliberate and intentional exploration of the different dimensions of our group identities. Those aspects of the social self that stem from our belonging to various groupings take a prominent position in the analysis of the unconscious group processes (Skolnick and Green 1993; Reed and Noumair 2000). The consultant must help participants explore and understand:

1. unconscious and irrational forces underlying their fears of difference

2. assumptions, myths and prejudices about difference that invoke divisiveness, marginality and alienation

3. conscious and unconscious uses and misuses of difference that may lead to destruction and annihilation of the other

4. How, when and why they are internally or externally pressed to claim only a single aspect of their multiple identities while relegating the remaining parts of the self to the background?

5. What are some of the processes involved in defining and redefining who we are, our perception of ourselves and others' perception of us?

The location and / or dislocation of the self in the group and the group in the self becomes the fabric and texture of large group experience. Ettin's succinct assertion regarding the 'inherent relationship between "persons in group" and "groups in persons," that is, the intersect of personal and collective identity' becomes the thematic focus of large group sessions (2000, p.239). Similarly, Pines points to the organic linkage between the self and the group and what may appear as an illusory boundary between the two. He affirms group analysis views regarding the 'essential element of "group" in the constitution of the individual...the individual is conceived of as being born into and constituted out of a network of other persons, who gain a sense of personal identity from the possibilities offered by the nature of their network: the horizontal or lateral dimension of social organizations, therefore – notions of culture, politics, religion, economical and historical circumstances – have to be considered as constituents of the individual self ' (1998, p.24).

The role of the consultant

Interventions and interpretations of large group process are informed and colored not only by the multiple group identities, but also the multiple conscious and unconscious roles held by consultants. Discourse is shaped and determined largely by the consultant as a combination of consultant, facilitator, manager, therapist, comedian, sociopolitical commentator,

alternating between participant-observer and participant-leader. I would like to emphasize that the boundaries between these roles are artificial at best. Moreover, because of the complex nature of the large group we must draw upon every conceivable resource at our disposal to formulate hypotheses, hoping that they will resonate with members' experiences and will advance the work of the group. Making rigid distinctions between person and role and acting on it destroys the endeavor. Holding on to a traditional analytic stance characterized by anonymity, neutrality and objective distance is not useful or relevant to our purposes, depriving ourselves and the members of the richness of our internal dialogue. However, it is crucial to maintain a delicate balance between making oneself available as an object to be used as a repository for members' projections, and emerging as a potentially known and knowable subject. This implies seeing the consultant as more than just essentially holding and containing the group (Blackwell 2000), but as an active participant in guiding, shaping and influencing its developing dialogue.

Wright discusses the use and misuse of the self in the group from a relational perspective. He explains Hoffman's dialectic relation in therapy between a 'personal-egalitarian aspect which allows for spontaneity, creativity, freedom and self expression and a role-defined hierarchical aspect which requires ritual, constraint, role determined behavior and adherence to institutionalized givens' (2000, p.192). I believe that our capacity to hold the tension between these two dimensions and intervene from the 'in-between-space' is what is most challenging.

I would like to clarify my position on participatory leadership in this context. As a leader of such an enterprise, I wish to influence the flow of communication and the direction and movement of the group. My vision is, that at a minimal level we move from hatred to impersonal fellowship (de Maré 1991) and at a maximal and more ambitious level there be moments of grace and transcendence (Lawrence 1993). In order to accomplish these goals, the consultant must assist in taming and managing the passionate and regressive pulls of the group. Movement from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position requires noting, naming, working through and deconstructing pronounced dichotomies. The consultant must be hyper-vigilant yet empathic to group members' tendencies to avoid and resist dealing with taboo subjects. However, naming the unspeakable is an act of courage that is necessary for the group

to develop. Deconstruction of polarizations by dialogue may lead to members becoming both known and knowable entities, rather than alienated and isolated, caricature representatives of their subgroups. The consultant's interpretation of projective and introjective identification is central in helping members understand their functioning in the group. She must first tolerate and track what group members do with their destructive impulses such as aggression, hatred, greed and envy, then help them to restore and recover the split-off pieces by reconstructing an integrative and meaningful narrative. To get to these points members and consultants must move from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position; from envy and hatred to gratitude; from monologic to dialogic engagement; and from negation to mutual recognition of both self and other as subjects. As this is established, members may move from dealing with visible and not so visible dynamics of power, control and dominance, to revealing their vulnerabilities and their life stories. By so doing, the possibilities for intimate connections increase and the large group starts to look more like the small group with its hallmark of familiarity, cohesion and intimacy (Agazarian and Carter 1993; Segalla 1996).

Transforming and transformative dialogues in the large group may become the most promising avenue for changing the geography of group relations.

Acknowledgement

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