

Keynote talk by Peter Zelaskowski (founding Chair of GAGP) at the annual gathering of Goldsmiths Association of Group Psychotherapists, 22nd May 2004

Exploring Our Roots

The original talk followed by a few reflections

I am delighted to be here (doubly so because there's a royal wedding in Spain today) and to have been asked to get this day started with a few of my reflections, reminiscences and thoughts on the early years of this Association and this group of psychotherapists. I suppose an early question I would want to ask is: what kind of group are we? Is it possible to talk about us as having a group identity? I'd like to use this opportunity to explore our roots to raise that issue and to perhaps attempt to give some definition to our identity as I saw it/as I see it. For example, am I a group analyst, a group analytic psychotherapist...and so on. I say as 'I saw it' because my distance from the Association over the past 5 years leaves me feeling estranged and out of touch, at the same time however, wanting and needing to reconnect, to fill in the substantial gaps in my relationship. It reminds me of an experience I once had attending Kevin Power and Sheila Thompson's large group during the early 90s. I'd missed the previous Saturday session (4 meetings) and at the start of the day I made reference to the intense events of the last session I'd attended, as if unable to believe the group could have moved on in my absence. "That tastes like very stale bread," said one of the others.

I'm going to be using, as my principal metaphor, ideas developed by Vamik Volkan in his work on Large Group identity, the transgenerational transmission of trauma and inter-ethnic conflict.

Volkan (founder of the Center for the Study of Mind and Human Interaction and the University of Virginia) constructs a model combining psychoanalysis and large group psychology. His model uses notions of core identity, sub-identity and large group identity. The core identity contains the large group identity. In this model being a group psychotherapist would be a sub-identity, however I think it's possible to talk of group psychotherapists (or any sub-identity) as having core, sub and large group component. For example, the EGATIN 'Essential Training Standards' talk of 'essential basic assumptions', 'core concepts' and 'core skills' (http://www.egatin.net/essential_training_standards.htm). Volkan asks what happens when the survival of a group is threatened in some fundamental manner – in our case perhaps the struggle with the UKCP. Amongst other things (he lists 20 symptoms of large group regression) 'ethnic markers' are reactivated in the form 'chosen traumas' or 'chosen glories'.

'The mental representation of a historical event induces feelings of success and triumph, what I call a 'chosen glory' can bring members of a large group together.' (Volkan, 1997, p81)

'Chosen traumas bring with them powerful experiences of loss and feelings of humiliation.' (Volkan, 1997, p82)

In Volkan's model, through a process of 'time collapse' those feelings can be reactivated as if the past events were present. I want to ask, do we as a group carry the equivalent of an 'ethnic marker'? Are we for example, the theoretically malnourished but experientially well fed group? Are not 'shared mental images' of events in the early development of this group reactivated at times of stress or threat, like 'group markers'? The reactivation of it makes the group members cohesive.

Early ideals

The course was set up to provide an alternative to the IGA, albeit similarly located in the same Foulkesian tradition, although a less elitist and culturally broader group psychotherapy training. It sought to achieve this through being financially accessible and by taking place at a time when full time public sector workers might be able to attend. Its focus (was this a political choice?) was the more inclusive and less resource hungry once-weekly-group. It carried a strong commitment to experiential learning, with the inclusion of the experiential group marking the course as different from other trainings. But as Gordon Lawrence pointed out when talking about the '**primary task**' (Gordon Lawrence 1977) of organisations, this is only the normative definition, the formal, official definition, 'what we say we are doing'. But then there's the existential primary task, what people within organizations believe they are doing. Then there's the phenomenal primary task, i.e., 'what is really going on'.

Unfortunately, although it can be said that this only became an issue later when psychotherapy trainings began being called to account, one of the things that was really going on was that to some degree accessibility took precedence over substance. Unquestionably, the course was set up with too little theory, in a way that was nearly its undoing.

Early deprivations and losses

Looking back there were a number of events that might be thought of as somehow emblematic of the condition in which as a group I think we found ourselves on qualifying:

1. The death of Helle Munro, not long after teaching us. As a group we developed a powerful transference to this charismatic woman – she was in fact dying before our eyes, each session more skeletal and out of voice than the last;
2. The withdrawal of two of the black members of the group; the death of one of the second generation, also black, close to qualification.
3. The loss of one of the experiential group leaders after the first year;
4. The move from Deptford to New Cross.

I would add the fact of our being housed in the Art Psychotherapy Unit as somehow compounding a sense of rootlessness. Primal scene fantasies about the nature of Kevin and Diana's relationship abounded – could that explain our loveless condition. Without Helle there was nobody. I am of course describing my own subjective take on the nature of the matrix during the early life of this group. The matrix being the transgenerational carrier of a group's entire experience.

So, what have been the transgenerational consequences of this training's early deprivations and losses? In my case, I am certainly aware that I have kept quiet and still keep quiet about the exact nature of my theoretical training. It has been and

continues to be a source of shame for me, even more so as I teach on two university psychotherapy trainings in Spain, near relatives in terms of structure and theoretical orientation, both of which offer a far more comprehensive theoretical basis (3 times the number of hours). I think this partly explains why, on qualifying, we went our different ways and why there wasn't the energy to form an association – after all it might draw attention to our limitations.

Volkan writes: 'When the members of an affected group cannot reverse their shame, humiliation, and helplessness and cannot mourn their losses, they obligate the subsequent generation(s) to complete these unfinished psychological processes. These *transgenerationally transmitted* psychological tasks in turn play a crucial role in shaping future historical and political processes.'

The Group Analytic Society

I think there is some sense in which our core identity as a group of group psychotherapists felt not so much under threat, but more insufficiently formed and only partially integrated. I left the course maybe feeling vaguely part of a Foulkesian tradition. I immediately signed up for Associate membership of GAS. It felt good to be accepted, even as some kind of insufficiently analyzed neighbor from the shabbier end of town – a feeling I was well conditioned to feel, having done my clinical placement at Barts, under Vivienne Cohen, as the only non-IGA trainee. As an adolescent I went to a grammar school and many of my friends were from middle class families. I never invited them to my working class home. I suppose I resentfully accepted that the IGA/GAS axis set the standards and was the large group I should aspire to. Hey, Kevin and Diana were both full members of GAS! It didn't occur to me that we might start building out own 'ethnic tent'. There didn't seem to be much impetus or energy for forming associations. It was however, the next generation that took up the issue of our large group identity and the necessary task of constructing a large group canvas within which we could at least share a sense of sameness with others that might compensate for our shaky core selves.

The British Association of Group Psychotherapists (BAGP)

I want to ask, not what was the purpose and function of the BAGP for group psychotherapy, but what was the BAGP's purpose and function for Goldsmiths' trained Group Psychotherapists. After all the initial impetus for the creation of the BAGP came from Goldsmiths – Nick Glover, Lauren White and David Glyn in particular. Nick Glover, using the model of the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA) in the USA as his point of departure, started to speak of the need for an 'umbrella organization', in the sense of a structure that could incorporate, on an equal footing, the diverse existing group psychotherapist identities – the equivalent of Volkan's large group canvas metaphor, through which a security and protection is achieved and a 'persistent sense of sameness' becomes shared with others under the umbrella. And although I didn't sign-up for the cause immediately, I felt the prospect of a BAGP might provide me with some sense of protection against the prevailing elements, and some sense of legitimacy that I think many of us did not experience on entering the group psychotherapy market place, feeling as we did insufficiently skilled and homeless. I would argue that the creation of the BAGP temporarily resolved a core difficulty in the Goldsmiths therapists' task of forging an identity, a shelter that would provide protection from the imminent looming external threat to our identity

represented by UKCP and the persistent internal threat stemming from the shame and unresolved losses locked into feelings about our training.

The tune I picked up in Pauline's e-mail - that Goldsmiths doesn't welcome you back, never feels like home nor a place to which one feels one can return, namely abandonment - sounded intensely familiar. On the hand I was left wondering how can this be. There's BAGP, GAGP, UKCP, UPCA – surely these bodies provide a compensatory sense of belonging. I suppose also that training in an academic institution and not clinical institution must have something to do with this – something which benefits us in other ways. Or is it that certain feelings connected to abandonment and loss form key elements in our large group identity

UKCP/UPCA

The struggle to achieve UKCP recognition (finally achieved in 1999) was a frustrating (in particular for Kevin and Diana who played such a critical role in bringing this about) painful and at times humiliating experience. Humiliating because it entailed publicly acknowledging that in some important respects the course in its early days was considerably lacking. There were times in the UKCP struggle when it seemed as if membership might only be available for current and future generations. The renewed impetus to set up GAGP in the mid 90s has its origins here, in the need to become: a) more involved in our destiny, b) more involved in the training; c) more self-caring and self-monitoring, but above all in a recognition that we graduates and the institution in which we trained exist in a state of interdependence.

A few reflections

One of the things that became much clearer to me during the course of the day, as we engaged in dialogue across the different generations, was that somehow my presentation underplayed central elements of my experience as a trainee group psychotherapist: that I'd enjoyed the course, that the group in which I'd trained was unusually diverse, and that the experience changed me profoundly. Why did I do this? A number of possible explanations occur to me. Perhaps I wanted to be accepted and to be less of 'an elder' and more one of the gang. I wanted to show that I understood the struggles that the group is going through. Perhaps though, and crucially, I wanted to disavow my older sibling status and all the baggage that goes with it, to pre-empt the group's envy at my good experience, to keep the group at a distance. Because there was a time when we (the prima genita) had mum and dad all to ourselves – two years in fact. And during the third year, we were pretty much kept apart from our new siblings. So I left Goldsmiths without having had to really engage with what it meant to have younger siblings. 'Exploring our roots' helped put me back in touch with this formative (lost/denied?) experience.

I would like to say thank you to the organizing group of GAGP for setting up such a well-timed event in the evolution of our group and for inviting me to speak and take part. I thoroughly enjoyed (re)meeting everybody. I look forward to taking this dialogue forward in future events and through our now up-and-running virtual group.

Bibliography

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