Spheres of Group Analysis

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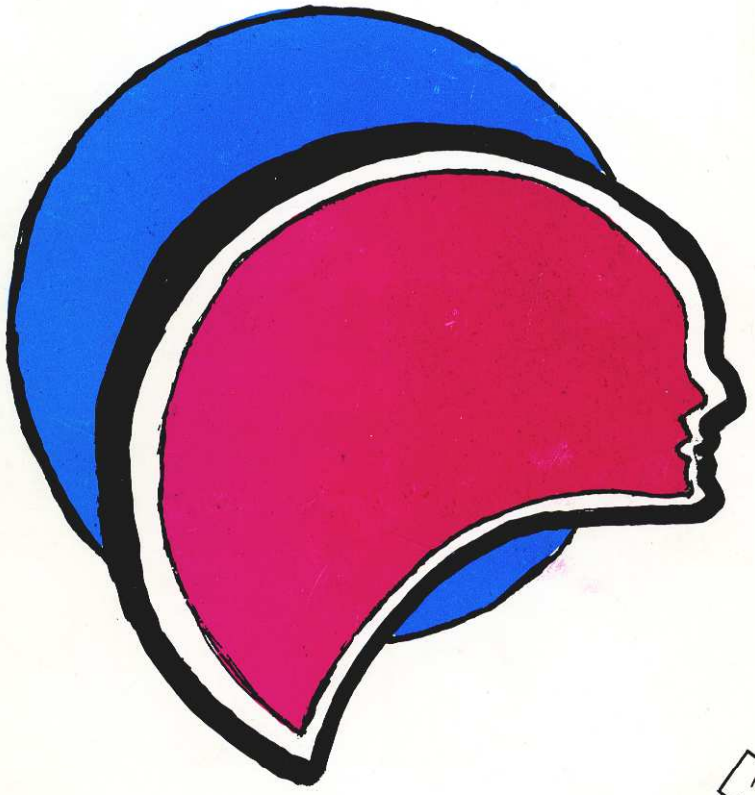

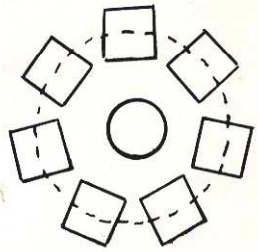

edited by T.E. Lear

Group Analysis and Higher Education

By M.L.J. ABERCROMBIE

The ideas of group analysis and ways of behaving in therapeutic groups have played an important part in my academic development. My experience began as a teacher of zoology in a fairly conventional degree course at Birmingham University, and continued with three research projects at University College, London. The first of these, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation for ten years in the Department of Anatomy, focussed on training pre-medical students in the skills basic to diagnosis. The second, in the Bartlett School of Architecture supported by the Leverhulme Trust Fund and the Social Science Research Council, was concerned with educating for a professional role in a rapidly changing society, which, among other things, would require working in design teams. The third project, sponsored by the University Grants Committee for three years, was aimed at improving small group teaching in the Universities.

It is perhaps at first sight surprising that my adoption of the ways of group analysis should have occurred during the first project, when the problem I was tackling was that of learning to behave scientifically in the practice of medicine. Observing accurately and comprehensively and drawing reasonable conclusions from the information obtained seems an objective, rational, individualistic activity far removed from the emotional conflict-ridden human relationships that are the stuff of group psychotherapy. The essential link is the students' and patients' relation to authority figures, and the way their past experience conditions their present behaviour.

Consider the process of observing. I had for some time been dissatisfied with the results of didactic teaching in biology, which was supposed to help students to be observant, but the weight of knowledge we provided seemed to

inhibit the ability to see things as they really are, to distinguish what *was* visible from what they had learned to think ought to be visible. For instance a text book diagram of that simple microscopic creature, *Amoeba,* will show it to possess two prominent spherical organelles, the solid nucleus, and the contractile vacuole. This diagram is a composite picture of what can be seen in different conditions. In the living *Amoeba* the nucleus is difficult to distinguish, but the contractile vacuole is clearly visible, rhythmically swelling and contracting, filling and emptying. In the dead Amoeba, fixed and stained, the vacuole is invisible because it has completely contracted and the nucleus is prominent, because it has taken up more stain than the rest of the body. But often a student drawing an *Amoeba* will draw both organelles, whether the creature he is looking at is living or dead. In the same way a child drawing an apple through which a knitting needle has been thrust will show the whole needle as though the apple is transparent, drawing what he knows, not what can be seen. Nor do we adults always distinguish clearly between the words "seeing" and "knowing".

Accounts of the physiology and psychology of vision gave little help in understanding the phenomenon of observer error — of the same stimulus pattern being differently interpreted by different observers, even experts in the subject, and of the same observer interpreting differently the same stimulus pattern at different times. But soon I came across the work of Ames[9] and the advocates of the transactional aspects of perception (see, for example, Blake and Ramsay),[10] which vividly demonstrate the influence of past experience on seeing. I began to see that the difficulties of behaving objectively, rationally and effectively were in some way connected with the way the student perceived his own relationship to knowledge, through his relationships with knowledgeable people, and therefore with his authority-dependency relationships. The problem was, how to take advantage of other people's experience without being confined by it, how to use old knowledge to behave effectively towards new and unexpected experiences. I started to teach in small groups, playing a non-directive role in discussion, but this raised considerable hostility in some students. As a result of gossiping about this with a colleague, I was invited by one of Dr Foulkes' colleagues to attend his therapeutic group of skin patients. It immediately became clear to me that if I could establish the kind of psychological climate that I felt in this therapeutic group, most of my problems in teaching groups would be solved. I therefore joined a therapeutic group conducted by Dr Foulkes, and started to apply some of what I learned from him in academic work. This involved profound changes in the teacher's rôle.

The conventional model of the teaching-learning situation is based on the

mother-infant relationship, a group of two, perpetuating the transference relationship. This is still the most highly prized educational relationship, as is exemplified by the employment, by those rich enough, of a personal governess or tutor, or, almost exclusively in Oxbridge until comparatively recently, of the tutorial system in universities. True, most of us are taught in classes, but the lines of communication are still mostly from the teacher to each individual, and even in the relatively adult set up of the lecture theatre, the teacher talks and the students listen and are not supposed either to talk, or to listen, to each other. The relation between teacher and pupil is necessarily asymmetrical. The teacher is an authority in his academic subject, and the student ignorant of it; the teacher is further invested with the authority of the institute, to which the student belongs only transiently. The teacher, as an examiner, may have powerful influence over the student's career and future. So the transference relationship hangs like a millstone round both their necks, mostly unquestioned and unchallenged.

Now the distinctive feature of Foulkes' variety of group psychotherapy is that he deliberately tried to release the conductor from the transference figure rôle, and to encourage the group members to resolve their transference relationships by interaction with each other as well as with him. This was by contrast with other psychoanalytically oriented techniques of group therapy in which the conductor analyses individuals within the group setting, or analyses the reactions of the group as a whole to himself as a transference figure. There is a useful analogy there with teaching in small groups organized for students to learn from their peers. The monolithic nature of authority can be modified, each will be learning about his own behaviour by contrast and comparison with that of his peers, instead of with that of his teacher only. Instead of seeing things (or failing to see them) from the viewpoint of the teacher only, he can see them from the various viewpoints of several of his peers, can judge the value of alternative interpretations and select accordingly, instead of swallowing (or rejecting) the teacher's version, the authoritative one, automatically and uncritically.

The main features of the course[1] that evolved over some ten years were as follows. The course was offered to pre-clinical students of anatomy as an attempt to train them to behave scientifically. It consisted of eight meetings, each lasting $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours, taking place regularly in the same room and at the same time each week, and members of the same group of 12 attended (though the course was voluntary, absences were very rare). The ideological frame-work was set by a demonstration of some principles of perception and communication, which showed how two people, or the same person at different times, looking at the same thing, would experience it differently. Exposure of the

essentially egocentric nature of perception gave quite a shock to would-be scientists! Observer error in science was shown to be subject to the same laws as govern perception in ordinary life. The factors affecting what was perceived could be considered under two headings – the previous relevant experience of the observer, and the context in which observations were made. The reception of information through the eyes was used to illustrate the processes involved in reception of information generally.

After this introduction, each session began with an exercise which was tackled individually for about ten minutes. Students were asked, for instance, to compare two radiographs, to analyse the published account of a small piece of experimental research, to discuss the word 'normal', or to write on 'classification'. Comparison and contrast of the individual responses to the exercise formed the focus of the discussion which followed. Individual differences were often very sharp – what one took for granted as an 'absolute fact' another regarded as an inference of questionable validity, and the next minute, on another issue, the rôles of believer and doubter might be reversed. A point which one student had seen as crucial another had dismissed as insignificant, and still another had simply not registered. Students were encouraged to speak freely and spontaneously in their own vernacular, not required to use the formal language customary in the debating hall, or when presenting work verbally to the teacher. The pace and style of conversation was variable, sometimes rambling and even seemingly chaotic ('You're the only polite one' an angry girl said to me 'you're the only one who stops talking when you're interrupted'). The non-linear style of the discourse made it possible for a student attempting to evaluate another's statement, or to justify his own, to express not only 'good reasons' but also personal associations which were not questioned by himself, but might be by others. In this 'free' or 'associative' discussion a student could learn how his own judgment in scientific matters had been influenced by powerful factors of which he had been unaware, and which he had been unable to evaluate. These factors ranged from minutia of the immediate context (e.g. the details of the layout of a research report) to deep seated, generalized attitudes about human nature, e.g. about the extent to which one had assumed that research workers could be trusted to report their work accurately, or editors to evaluate it reliably; or whether one thought that good research is not likely to be done by women, Americans or physiologists working in a genetics lab.

In the last three years of this project we gave tests of observation to students and compared the performance of those who had taken the course and those who had not yet done so.[11] The following differences were found between the two groups. Compared with students who had not taken the

course, those who had tended to distinguish better between descriptive and inferential statements, to make fewer false inferences, to consider alternative inferences rather than confine their attention to one only, and to be less 'set', i.e., less inappropriately influenced in dealing with one problem by the experience of an immediately preceding problem. These results indicate that the course helped students to make more reasonable judgments in scientific matters. matters.

The adoption of this method of teaching requires a reversal of the teacher's rôle from that used in lecturing. In order to encourage the student to examine his own habits of behaving in scientific matters, the teacher talks very little, but listens attentively and shows signs of having heard; makes tentative and associative statements rather than authoritative or dogmatic ones; sets a pattern of contemplating, of considering the various implications of statements, of noticing consistencies and inconsistencies between statements, of indicating the relevance of apparently irrelevant statements, and in general helps to analyse the extraordinarily complex tangle of ideas, perceptions and expectations that contribute towards the making of judgments. Hopefully, increased understanding of one's own mental processes will help one to behave more effectively, in this case in scientific matters.

The same basic principle was used in the other two projects, with students of architecture,[2-7] and university teachers using small group methods.[8] Again a small group met regularly for $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours weekly in the same room, and the teachers (two of us collaborated in these projects) played a highly disciplined rôle. The focus for discussion, however, did not begin with a specific exercise, but was spontaneously generated by current events — in architecture, the organization of the course, work in the studio, problems of designing, team work, assessing work, examinations — and with the teachers, their experiences in group teaching.

It is perhaps worth noting that while in this work we are focussing on specific academic or professional points (unlike the situation in psychotherapy when the whole personality is the target) participants often reported more peripheral changes. A medical student, for instance, said he could now talk to the vicar, and others said that the course influenced their general philosophy of life; similarly, some teachers spontaneously reported that their lecturing improved, not only their small group teaching, and that they got on better with colleagues, not only with students.

To summarize, I have found that some of the basic ideas of group analytic psychotherapy can be usefully applied in higher education — for instance, the need of the teacher to withdraw from playing a dominating didactic role, to encourage interaction among other members of the group, and recognition

of the power of the 'group situation' — the sometimes apparently irrelevant features of the context that may profoundly influence the behaviour of the group. It is the style of conducting the group that matters most, and the rigorous self-discipline that is required can be most easily learned, I believe, by experiencing a therapeutic group for some time. It is important, however, to be clear about the boundaries between therapy and academic teaching; the non-verbal behaviour may be very similar, but the verbal behaviour is not. The best way of continuing to learn how to conduct groups is, I believe, to belong to a group of colleagues doing similar work, meeting at regular intervals to exchange experiences.

To facilitate the attitudinal changes that are necessary in teachers and students alike, it is a great help to study together video or sound recordings of their own classes. They can become sensitive to subtle clues that they were formerly blind to, and respond more appropriately to them. They can see how they collude with each other unconsciously in behaviour that reasonably they do not want to encourage. Students can slowly learn to outgrow the crippling effect of their dependence on the teacher,and find ways of monitoring what goes on in the discussion themselves — encouraging a silent student to open his mouth, for instance, or an over-talkative one to shut his. They can get better control of their own behaviour, and enjoy the freedom of doing better the piece of work they came together to do.

Acknowledgements

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