

STUDY OF COMMUNICATION IN A GROUP BY A GROUP¹



S. H. Foulkes (1964). *Therapeutic Group Analysis*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 320 pp. Part 4: Group Analysis in Operation, 20. Teaching, *Study and Research*, p. 269.

The following study is of particular interest as a real group study. As the reader will see, it is a study of a group, by the group; though the formulation was the end made by three or four of the members in co-operation. (As far as I can remember those mainly concerned were Dr Norbert Elias, Dr P. B. de Maré, Dr Martin James and myself.)

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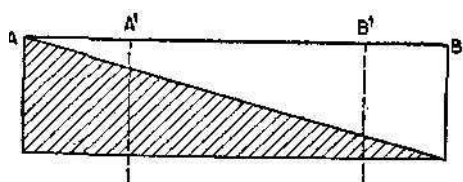
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This preparatory Commission was made up of members who are either psycho-analytically trained or at least at home with psycho-analytic concepts. When they came together they decided to consider the problem of communication as they have found it in their various professional ways of life, which are very diverse.

At the one extreme, members are dealing with highly organized groups such as teaching classes, in which there is a definite agenda and way of proceeding, a tangible structure on which the procedure hangs. At the other extreme is Group Analysis, in which apart from a regular time and place of meeting there is a minimum of regularized procedure and no set topic or programme, all arrangement which tends to bring the personal aspects into the open.

Owing to the mixed composition of the preparatory Commission it soon became apparent that while it was possible to emphasize the differences between discipline in the organized (e.g. teaching) group (A) and the spontaneous group-analytic group (B) there was also something in common—a sense in which the less prominent quality from the one style of group was still present, although largely latent in the other (A'—B'). This recognized relationship is expressed in the following diagram:



A = Structured (e.g. teaching group)

B = Unstructured (e.g. group analytic group)

¹ Report of the Preparatory Commission dealing with communication, particularly verbal communication with reference to group analysis. (Prepared for the International Congress on Mental Health, London, 1948.)

It would be an interesting problem whether it is valid to think of groups generally as situated on a scale of the sort suggested by the diagram ranging from the most institutionalized to the most spontaneous—the presence of organization and framework inhibiting the spontaneity and vice versa.

The way in which this problem presents itself to us is shown by the following example. A member of this preparatory Commission, a teacher of Social Psychology, who finds these experiences of group analysis very valuable, reported that at a lecture he read out to his class an essay by one of the pupils. In this she said that with her upper middle class background, when she encountered a lower class accent, she saw the warning 'social red light'. In the discussion the student with the worst accent in the class insisted that the essayist was perfectly right because people should speak clearly. The teacher brought this example to the preparatory Commission to illustrate how his role as a 'teacher' and the role of a therapist could be called for by the same situation but would require different handling. In this case the teacher, keeping to his agenda, handled the problem differently from the therapist, who might have emphasized the personal element in the student's contribution to the discussion.

In the group-analytic situation the personal problem is in the foreground, the institutional aspect in the background, discussion is free-floating. By this means group-analytic groups uncover or 'take the lid off' processes which may remain hidden in less spontaneous groups. It is a prerequisite of group analysis that the participants are agreed in bringing personal problems from their several 'private worlds', and are prepared to admit to possessing thoughts and ideas outside the range of polite conversation. The degree of candour shown vanes according to the therapist and the social code prevailing in the group members, but many unexpected facets of the process of communication are seen, because of the limitation of artificial interference and the comparative exclusion of social reality considerations.

Over the whole scale of these groups, from the highly institutionalized to the largely spontaneous, communication in the group takes place predominantly at a verbal level. In choosing one topic, however, we have not overlooked the fact that i: limiting ourselves to verbal communication we are making a comparatively artificial abstraction and that the language of gestures, emotional appearances, vocal tones, etc., have their own important place in the process of communication. There are, however, positive reasons that governed this choice. It is not accidental that in group analysis words are the main means of communication. Verbal communication is of a very specialized kind, not comparable to any other form of communication, and confined to the human species where it forms the basis of civilized living and scientific thinking. But words are flexible symbols, although they can conceal as much as they communicate, they are nevertheless well ordained for use in a complex milieu, such as human society, capable of strong emotional colouring. An example from group analysis will illustrate a type of communication which takes place in free-floating discussion:

A girl described her washing compulsion and incidentally mentioned that it became worse if she feels hostile towards her family. After an interval, a second member recalled (as though it bore no relation to the earlier communication) two incidents. She dreamt that she had received a telegram announcing her mother's death, and on the same day her nephew had been subject to an electric shock while in the bath. A third member recalled, after an interval in exactly the same way, that her mother, because of some nervous difficulty, could never show any affection to her children and would never allow them to make affectionate approaches to her. In this case the literal meaning of the original communication was ignored, and the theme of family

hostility —an incidental part of the communication made an impact leading to a chain of associations which are personal, intimate and normally belong to the patient's private world.

From our psychoanalytic orientation we are particularly concerned with the verbal level of communication, although we are not unaware of other levels of communication. We are aware that the problems of therapy and neurosis presuppose the need for words as symbols. In group analysis, the total situation, including the observer, is implied. The question arises whether the polar extremities of group organization, on one extreme the structured group, and at the other the unstructured group, are qualitatively different or are only differing in degree. Should we stress the differences or the similarities between the two extremes?

In writing this report, we can alternatively emphasize:

1. The history of our group and the changes which have taken place in it.
2. The conclusions we have arrived at, or
3. The material we have dealt with.

We have had to choose where, on the scale of group organization, we wished this preparatory Commission to stand. At the one extreme there was the definite feeling that personalities should not obtrude, so that we might avoid the therapeutic pole. On the other hand, in order to accumulate material we could not afford to organize an agenda. After five months we are just beginning to understand each other enough to attempt formulations, although these must be concerned less with what we have done than with what we have to do. A problem for discussion is: How far is it true that groups meeting for other purposes, for example Trade Union or religious meetings, have a similar choice to make? Another question would be: Is the type of problem revealed in group analysis also present in the more structured group, but prevented by procedure from being seen? Certainly, as seen in the example quoted from the Social Psychology class, both types of situation, even at their extremes, seem to have relevance for each other.

In attempting to communicate, we take it that the communication should help to bring about a change, to exert influence, and in this sense the effect on the hearers of what is said must be considered apart from what was literally intended by the speaker. The value of the group for the elucidation of the problem of communication can be particularly seen here, for whatever the literal intention on the speaker's part, it must be accepted that what one's hearers understand one to have said, that is to say, the effect of a communication, is equally valid. A message may be understood in as many different senses as there are different members in the group (here naturally we include a case where the speaker's affect is at variance with the content of what he says, and the mood is communicated rather than the words.) An example of this sort of experience can be given:

Three of our preparatory Commission are members of a therapeutic group, two as therapists alternately in charge (Drs F. and M.) and the third taking part as a patient (Dr. H). Dr M. regularly makes a written report of the proceedings. In one of the reports the following appeared:

'Mrs N. enlarged on an incident which had happened at 16 years of age (or 18?) when she was knocked down by a car. Immediately she had told the policeman that it was her own fault and not the drivers. She had repeated this several times, and next

day the papers had headlines of her attempted suicide, when in fact there was no question of suicide...

"Dr F. pointed out that her insistence that it was her own fault was an attempt to retain her sense of being nevertheless in the right."

Dr. F. quoted this in the Commission's meeting as an example of misrepresentation, and stated that his recollection of what he had said was: *"Perhaps the newspaper reports were right after all"*, or words to that effect. Dr H., the 'patient' and scientist, confirmed Dr F.'s version of what he had actually said. (Dr. M. was not present at this meeting of the preparatory Commission.) Dr. H. also mentioned, however, that Dr M.'s version reflected *the feeling of the group as regards Mrs. N.*

Following this contribution, the discussion at the preparatory Commission revolved round possible interpretations of the misunderstanding.

Dr F. said that, if analysing in the usual way, one could advance a number of explanations of this 'misunderstanding', as for instance the following:

1. Dr M. might be disturbed in his reception. But as he appears to report other remarks correctly, the disturbance could be localized between him and Dr F. More accurately, perhaps, it might reflect a disturbance confined solely to this particular group situation.
2. It might be a disturbance in Dr M. in relation to the content of the remark.
3. It might be a disturbance in Dr F. in so far as he might be mistaken as to what he had actually said, and so on.

This type of analysis of a misunderstanding can of course be examined very well in group analysis, but equally well or even better in an individual situation. However, *Dr. H.'s observation puts quite a different complexion on the nature of this misunderstanding.* He states that although the report was totally wrong with reference to what Dr F. had said, it nevertheless rendered accurately the group's feeling in regard to Mrs N. It can be seen that for this fact to come to light at least a third person, in this case Dr. H., is necessary. This is a good example for the new dimension which is added when at least three persons are participating in the same event ('Model of three'). In our example Dr. H. voices the condensed feeling of the group, as it appears to him. The group need not necessarily agree with him, and each individual member would put his own particular complexion on to this issue. In this way the matter would appear to be far more complex, but also more rich. If the examination of such a communication between two people can be said to be two-dimensional, and that in between three people (as in the above example) to be three-dimensional, the analysis in a group situation would be multi-dimensional.

This is only one example, and a very simple one at that, to represent the type of thing we can study and follow up in the therapeutic groups which are, so to speak, our experimental situations. This example illustrates quite well two further points:

1. What aspects of communication can in our opinion best be observed and studied in a group situation, and perhaps only in a group situation.
2. How difficult it is to respond this type of observation, in particular as most of the time we are confronted with far more complicated topics than the one here described.

COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE GROUP (GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS)

1. The natural history of any group involves the development of group feeling which unites the individual members. This unity is made up in part of common experiences, a common language and an expressed common purpose. Trade, barter and sex have a similar effect but therapeutic groups have to learn to do without these powerful aids. With the increased homogeneity of the group, communication is facilitated. By these means a common framework of reference is created and any communication within the group becomes group property. In a communication between two people, the communication has a private reference understood by the communicator and recognized by the person to whom it is communicated. Among the listeners there are varying degrees of distortion.

2. The composition of a group, however well selected or conducted, affects the rate and degree of integration. A group such as ours, drawn from so many professions, was much enriched by the very factor and curiously little disturbed, although there were some superficial preliminary difficulties experienced by members without previous contact with other disciplines.

3. It was generally recognized that examples from group-analytic experience were valuable means of communication, that communicating from experience was as effective as learning from experience. Examples are concrete, living samples of what is actually to be communicated and less prone to distortion than abstract or general arguments.

4. Disciplined or formal group discussion we feel is less productive or stimulating than free, shifting undirected talking. It creates an atmosphere in which problems obtain freer expression and ventilation. Individual contributions are more than interrupted monologues. Marked modifications of opinion are often observed in the course of an evening, but as would be expected, members vary greatly in their degree of intellectual plasticity. On the negative side the method allows a good many intriguing problematical fish to slip through the nets of formulation. For those concerned with exact formulation the less disciplined form of discussion was at first irksome, but even they were prepared to admit that the 'character' of a group is best liberated by this procedure. We have now decided to meet the demand for formulation by a compromise in method, the group devoting the last half-hour of the evening to summarizing what it has discussed; With these data in hand two members would then undertake the formulation submitting it to the group at the commencement of the next session. (Formulation with freedom).

5. The intended effect of a communication influences its very form.

6. The 'value' of a communication bears a direct relation to the 'standing' of the member within the group.

THE PROBLEM OF UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING

1. The problem of mutual understanding arises in every group and our own special group is no exception to this. We are thus able to observe, analyse and record our own experiences in this direction.

2. It was early realized that many misunderstandings were ultimately problems of semantics, that is, examples of verbal and grammatical misuse. It was, however,

decided to accept the deficiencies latent in the actual or literal sense of a statement and to concentrate on the opposite end of communication: the effect. It was agreed that the speaker was the best witness of what he intended to say, although he may not be the best person to express what he intended to say. It was important always to differentiate between the intention and effect of communication.

3. It was agreed that cases of complete understanding do occur, but are rare, but that incomplete understanding (so-called distortions) had a positive value. We are altogether impressed by the fact that both aspects of communication are equally of importance for study, that is to say how communication is disturbed as well as how it actually comes about. While it is difficult to over-estimate the degree of distortion or the great variety of meanings which may be read into even the simplest utterance, one is equally impressed by the intensity and accuracy of what is successfully conveyed and mutually understood.

4. Other distortions were called *irito* being as communication raised simultaneous counter-communications which blocked the free reception and consideration of a communication. It was observed that the recipient of a communication while listening may already in his own mind be preparing his reply and in this way blunt or distort his ability to receive. For instance, a member mentioned that while he is listening to somebody else he has to re-translate automatically into his own terms for it to make sense. This type of observation makes us believe that the process of communication is not best described in terms of a transmitter and receiver as is usually done.

First of all we are aware that the transmitter takes into account the receiver in preparing his remarks, and per contra that receiving is by no means only a passive function. This means that both people take an active part in the process. We can compare this process with the analogy of a mercury vapor lamp where there are two poles and an arc of light in between them. In this case the poles would represent the two people and the arc the communication. Whereas the two poles (the two people) are indispensable for the process to take place, the process itself is a totally different and independent phenomenon. We would go further than this formulation, which is still rather static, to say that in the case of a communication the process itself is already present in a germinal form in each of the participants.

5. Misunderstandings might arise through emotional disturbances in the recipient of the communication in relation to the speaker, the group, or the content of the remark.

6. The occurrence of misunderstanding was often a more accurate index of group experiences or trends than the literal understanding of a communication.

7. It would be more accurate to speak of degrees of understanding rather than 'misunderstanding'. There is always a link, however tenuous, between what is said and what is understood. 'Reaching an understanding' is an oscillatory process between the participants. Giving and taking and giving back again until a satisfactory (satisfying) degree of understanding has been reached.

THE INFLUENCE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS ON THE PROCESS OF COMMUNICATION

1. In every group we are beset all the time with the problem of considering the personalities and personal reactions of group members and the existence of interpersonal tensions. Even in purely scientific groups the swing between the therapeutic and the academic is apparent.

2. The personal factor is less to the fore where there is an immediate aim or purpose; but even in our group, well supplied with topics, the problem often arose.

3. We are particularly concerned to see if it is possible to integrate the group sufficiently to ensure co-operation in our common purpose without undue preoccupation with interpersonal and personal problems.

4. We could not help observing that basic differences of personality make-up reflect individual differences in the approach to problems with a consequent disturbance of smooth communication. It creates a further problem for every group as to whether sufficient common ground or language can be found to render full co-operation possible, while making allowances for the individual personalities involved. This is closely linked up with the problem of taking personal motives into account and bringing intimate aspects under discussion.

5. Intellectually all are agreed that in sociological studies the observer forms an integral part of the situation or field, but persons vary greatly in their sensitivity to the application of this principle in their own case. This factor in itself is a significant bar to good communication.

6. In general, the more impersonal a type of communication the more it is understood in its actual sense —the literal meaning. At the other end of the scale, where we are concerned with effect rather than sense, personalities become highly involved. This has a special bearing in relation to the communication of objective knowledge, as in teaching.

7. Complete understanding of a communication demands therefore a close appreciation of the nature of the situation leading to the communication, the personalities of the participants, the interpersonal relations and their standing within the group, together with the underlying motives, and finally the existing integration within the group. Communication is dependent upon so many variables that in trying to make an analysis one inevitably comes up against many pseudo-problems and pseudo-solutions.

