Social Selves and the Notion of the 'Group-as-a-whole'

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Introduction

One of the concepts that many group therapists use to make sense of what is going on in a therapy group is that of the 'group-as-a-whole'. A number of other terms are used to signify a similar idea. For example, some talk about the group as a supra-personal network, a living system, a matrix, a psychic apparatus, or a group mind. They talk about the group as being more than the sum of its parts, the individuals, who compose it. Group forces are said to impact on individuals and the group itself is said to have moods of its own and to speak through its members. People are sometimes said to be acting out some role on behalf of the group. All of these formulations, therefore, postulate an entity that is outside of, at a higher level than, individuals and there is a tendency to reify, anthropomorphise and mystify this entity, even when it is held to be an illusion rather than a reality. This entity is understood to be unconsciously constituted by individual intrapsychic processes of projection, projective identification, introjection, identification and splitting. The entity created in this way is then assumed to act back on its individual members as the unconscious cause of their actions. What is being postulated, therefore, is a metaphysics of human action, that is, a hidden reality beyond, above or behind appearances of the phenomena in question. This hidden reality is then understood as the cause of human action.

The effect of this hidden reality is frequently held to be the regression of individuals to infantile, primitive states of dependency and aggression. It is often assumed that, in a group, individuality is lost, contact with reality severed and task performance destroyed, unless anxiety can be contained by some form of organisation, or by the skill, often interpretive skill, of the therapist. This view leads to a practice in which the therapist may interpret the actions of the 'group-as-a-whole' so that through awareness of what is happening to them individuals can free themselves of the group's unconscious causal powers and so act more independently, autonomously and rationally as individuals.

In this paper, I seek to draw out the, often implicit, assumptions upon which this way of thinking is built and contrast it with an argument that takes seriously Foulkes' (1948) dictum that the individual is social through and through. I present an argument that seeks to hold rigorously to the view that individuals are always interdependent, never autonomous, and that, therefore, selves are social selves. Far from being lost, individuality is always constituted in a group. If one takes this perspective then there is

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no place for the notion of the 'group-as-a-whole' as an explanation of human action. Instead, rather than postulating a hidden reality, one focuses attention on the phenomena of human interaction, that is, on the thematic patterning of relationships between people in a group, noticing how that patterning is formed by them and *at the same time* forms them. The causal explanation of interaction is then in terms of the interactions themselves rather than some 'thing' beyond, above or behind them. I argue that this shift in the focus of attention has important implications for therapeutic practice.

I first provide a brief description of the notion of the 'group-as-a-whole' and then, because of the constraints of a short paper, I give a necessarily condensed description of the theory of complex responsive processes (Stacey, Griffin & Shaw, 2000; Stacey, 2001; Griffin, 2001; Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2003), which is a theory of social selves. After that, I explore the way in which the perspective of complex responsive processes provides an alternative explanation of human interaction compared to the notion of the 'group-as-a-whole' with.

The 'group-as-a-whole' from the perspectives of psychoanalysis and group analysis

Throughout his writing on the individual and the group, between 1908 and 1930, Freud (1908; 1913; 1921; 1927; 1930) consistently made a number of fundamental assumptions about the relationship between them (see Stacey (2003) for a fuller development). First, the individual psyche is an internal world of object representations and the group / the social is an entity external to the individual. Second, the psychology of this external entity, the group / the social, can be explained in terms of the psychology of the individual. Group behaviour recapitulates the individual oedipal situation, just as that individual oedipal situation recapitulates a mythical overthrow of the primal leader and the introjection of his ideals. The group is the individual writ large, constructed by individual psychic processes of projection and introjection. Third, the formation of groups involves a regression to infantile and primitive states so that the individual is incapacitated by the group unless it can contain anxiety through forms of organisation such that individuals can remain autonomous, independent and rational. Fourth, the social is a constraint that is internalised as superego so that the relationship between the individual and the group is basically conflictual, a conflict that is dealt with intrapsychically in a dynamic in which 'the unconscious' is central. Fifth, the internal world of the psyche is structured by the clash between individual instinct and the group. Freudian thinking is thus characterised by a duality of individual and group, an inside which is an individual internal world consisting of object representations and unconscious psychic processes, and an outside which is a group entity created by the individual intrapsychic processes. Communication between individuals in a group takes the form of transmission of mental contents in processes of identification, projection and introjection.

These fundamental assumptions have had a continuing effect on the development of psychoanalytic thinking about the group. Klein (1988) retained Freud's central

assumptions of internal worlds communicating with each other using mechanisms of transmitting and receiving and she greatly elaborated them in pre-oedipal terms. Bion (1961) developed these intrapsychic notions into a theory of group functioning, where individuals coming together in a group anonymously and unconsciously contribute mental contents to the group. The group itself is an illusion formed in the internal worlds of the individuals constituting it through intrapsychic processes. Like Freud, Bion also thought of the group as a regressive phenomenon in which it is very difficult for individuals to function rationally and autonomously as a work group. Bion drew attention to particular universal defences employed in group life to defend against its innate anxieties, taking the form of the well-known basic assumptions. The group, then, recapitulates the infantile primitive defences of splitting, projection and projective identification of the internal world of the infant just as in Freud' thought. Bion's understanding of group life was considerably developed, from the 1940s on, by those working at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (for example, Miller & Rice, 1967). They took Bion's development of Klein's view of the psyche as internal world, the inside, and combined it with a theory of the outside provided by general systems theory developed by the biologist von Bertlanffy (1968) in the period around the Second World War.

Object relations theory and its combination with open systems thinking, therefore, elaborated Freud's basic view of the group and its relationship with the individual. This elaboration has continued to exert an enormous influence on other psychoanalytic thinking about the individual and the group. For example, Anzieu (1984) regards groups as the consequence of individual projections. In their projective activity, individuals are said to create an overarching group psychical apparatus, often experienced as mother. Ezriel (1952) worked very much in the tradition of Bion and said that the group analytic task was to focus on the group as opposed to the individuals. He talked about individuals in a group driven by forces beyond their control as if the group had needs and exercised an agency quite apart from the individuals composing it. Whitaker (1985) also saw the group as a phenomenon existing at a different level to the individuals composing it. This phenomenon has special characteristics such as group moods, emotional contagion, shared themes, norms, beliefs and collusive defences. In Agazarian's (1994b) systems-centred approach to group therapy, the 'group-as-a-whole' is a system which develops from simple to complex by splitting into differentiating subgroups. In her system-centred group, the basic unit is the sub-group rather than the individual member and she talks about deliberately exploiting group forces.

More recently relational and intersubjective psychoanalysts have been developing a more socially oriented form of psychoanalytic theory (e.g. Mitchell and Aron, 1999; Ogden, 1994; Stolorow, Atwood & Brandchaft, 1994). They have made a significant move away from Freud's metapsychology and his focus on intrapsychic phenomena. However, the notion of the internal world and the distinction between inside and outside remains a central feature of both theory and practice. The focus of practice is on the dyad and the theory is developed in terms of a dyad. What people create in their interaction is some kind of system, or third, external to them, quite consistent with the conceptualisations of individual and group of the writers mentioned above.

In some respects, Foulkes' thinking about individual and the group has much in common with this psychoanalytic / systemic approach, but as Dalal (1998; 2001) has pointed out it also contains another, contradictory strand drawn from the thought of Elias (2000/1939). When arguing from the psychoanalytic / systemic perspective, Foulkes describes the group as a transpersonal, or supra personal network in which its members are equivalent to nodes and the whole, the group, is primary and prior to its parts, the individuals. He talks about the transpersonal network giving utterance through individual speakers (Foulkes, 1964). He describes the 'group-as-a-whole' as a living organism, a spirit, atmosphere, or climate, distinct from the individuals composing it, having moods and reactions (Foulkes, 1948 p140). According to Foulkes, then, when people come together in a group they create a new phenomenon, a suprapersonal psychic system, a matrix, which he describes as a hypothetical web of communication, a total unified field of mental happenings of which the individual is a part.

This perspective outline so far in this section encourages the therapist to focus attention on collective unconscious fantasies about the group-as-a-whole, for example, that members are defensively experiencing the group as mother. One will try to understand such unconscious motivation in terms of regression to primitive states, constituted by intrapsychic processes of transference, projection, introjection and identification. In focusing attention in this way, the perspective distracts attention from the phenomenology of group interaction in the living present, encouraging instead a focus on early trauma and mother-infant relationships.

Under the influence of Elias (2000/1939), however, Foulkes sometimes rejects the spatial notions of mind inside and group outside (Foulkes, 1948, p10/11) and says that mind lies in each individual's need for communication and belonging. He regards language as one of the most important mental phenomena and this can only be maintained as a group phenomenon (Foulkes, 1990 p277/8). This strand in Foulkes' thought can be summarised by his saying that the individual is social through and through. Foulkes emphasised the social processes of belonging and the therapeutic process as one of widening and deepening communication between group members. Here, Foulkes leaves behind the idea of the group as fundamentally regressive and sees it as fundamentally constitutive of the individual. He does not emphasise the destructive aspects of group interaction, indeed he may be said to have idealised the group (Nitsun, 1996) It seems to me that his practice was particularly consistent with this perspective, although he never consistently developed this social strand in his thinking. In a recent book, *Complexity and Group Processes: a radically social understanding of the individual* (2003), I have tried to develop this idea in relation to the therapy group, using what colleagues and I have called a complex responsive processes theory of human action. The next section provides a necessarily condensed summary of this perspective, indicating some questions it raise about therapeutic practice.

Groups and individuals as complex responsive processes of relating

The theory of complex responsive processes draws on some analogies from the natural complexity sciences interpreted in the human sphere in accordance with the thought of George Herbert Mead (1934) and Norbert Elias (2000/1939). First, I give a brief indication of the key notions from the natural complexity sciences which provide useful analogies and then go on to interpret them as far as human action is concerned.

The natural complexity sciences

Those working in the natural complexity sciences seek to model the temporal movement of natural phenomena in terms of nonlinear interaction between the large numbers of entities comprising them. There are a number of strands in these sciences, for example, chaos theory (Gleick, 1988), dissipative structure theory (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984; Prigogine, 1997), synergetics (Kelso, 1995) and complex adaptive systems (Goodwin, 1994; Kauffman, 1995, Waldorp, 1992). I will focus attention on the last mentioned.

Complex adaptive systems consist of large numbers of entities, called agents, interacting with each other, adapting to each other, to produce overall order or coherence. For example, the human brain can be thought of as a complex adaptive system. It consists of 100 million agents (neurons), each of which interacts with a limited number (up to 30,000) of others. In firing electro-chemical energy, one neuron triggers the firing of others and is in turn triggered by the limited number of others it is connected to. In this sense each agent is acting locally. There is no overall blueprint, programme or plan determining the overall pattern, only the myriad local interactions between agents. The key question, then, is this: How does the overall order of coherent thought and action come about in this endless, iterative local interaction?

What the studies of complex adaptive systems show is the possibilities and properties of local interaction. When the number of agents and the number and strength of the connections between them is large enough, the whole system displays patterns of movement that are stable and unstable at the same time, a dynamic referred to as 'the edge of chaos'. The system is then not caught in a completely repetitive, stable pattern nor is it caught in an unstable, random pattern without any order but, rather, displays a paradoxical temporal movement of stability and instability at the same time. It is in this dynamic that the local interaction of agents, known as self organisation, yields overall order. That overall order has not been designed – it emerges without any blueprint or programme for the overall order itself. However, self organisation does not mean that each agent is free to do anything. This is because the requirement to interact imposes constraints on each agent and the more they are constrained by each other the more the constraints will conflict with each other. Order is sustained, then, not by some plan or blueprint for the whole but by the myriad conflicting constraints the agents impose on each other through the requirement that they interact. Furthermore, emergence does not mean that something 'just' happens. What emerges does so precisely because of how each agent is interacting, or not interacting, with other agents in their local situations.

The first of property of nonlinear relationships and iterative agent interactions, then, is that local interaction, that is self organisation, produces emergent widespread coherence. Local interaction is the cause of overall global order – they are facets of the same processes of interaction. The second property has to do with the paradoxical dynamic of simultaneous stability and instability, simultaneous predictability and unpredictability, displayed in patterns of local interaction and the global coherence that emerges from it. In other words, the implication is that iterative interaction between large numbers of highly connected, mutually constraining agents produces emergent overall coherent patterns which are unpredictable in important respects.

The third property has to do with diversity. When the agents are all the same, homogeneous, then self organisation produces one overall pattern (Reynolds, 1987). While that pattern displays the paradoxical dynamic of stable instability, making it impossible to predict its detailed development, the system has no internal capacity to spontaneously move to a new pattern (Allen, 1998). It cannot display creativity, or evolve, because it is unfolding a general pattern already enfolded in it. However, when agents are diverse, the system does have the internal capacity to move spontaneously to completely new patterns, showing that the evolution of novel pattern is only possible where interacting agents are heterogeneous (Allen, 1998). These agents are iterating, that is, roughly repeating, their interactions with each other in each time period. However, since no iteration is exactly the same as another and since nonlinear interaction has the potential for amplifying small differences into completely different overall patterns, it follows that each iteration has the potential for transformation. Interaction is creating patterns of interaction which create further patterns of interaction and so on. We could call this transformative causality, a paradoxical causality of repetition and potential transformation at the same time, where interaction is patterning itself from within, as it were, without any outside casual agency. In other words, evolution is occurring through the local interaction between diverse agents, that is, through self organisation rather than chance as in neo-Darwinian theories of evolution (Ray, 1992). The evolution of novel pattern is a movement into the unknown and thus radically unpredictable. In other words, the interaction of the agents is no longer unfolding that which is already enfolded but, rather, perpetually creating the future as both repetition and potential transformation at the same time.

This means that any notion of a whole becomes quite problematic. There is no already existing whole being unfolded and the emerging overall pattern cannot be described as a whole because it is always evolving. One would need to talk about an 'incomplete whole' or 'an absent whole' (Bortoft, 1985) and it become increasingly unclear what is to be gained by doing this rather than dropping the whole notion of a 'whole'. If the notion of a 'whole' becomes problematic then so does the notion of 'system'. System models where the agents are heterogeneous, in effect, take on an evolutionary path of their own. Since, the phenomena they are modelling are also evolving along unpredictable paths of their own, it is highly likely that model and reality will rapidly diverge. This creates a bit of a problem for the scientific modeller who at the very least has to give up the hope of prediction and focus on explanation and insight. For me, the complexity sciences are important because they point to this very different notion of causality. The complexity

sciences are important because, at least on one interpretation, they raise questions about the meaning of a 'whole' and challenge taken for granted notions of causality, pointing to a form of causality in which there are no causal agencies above, below or behind interaction itself.

However, we need to avoid simply applying insights from the natural complexity sciences to human action if we are to avoid the confusion that has often been created in the past by taking notions from the natural sciences and simply applying them in the human sphere. For example, the notion of system has been imported from the natural sciences into theories of human action. However, the first systems thinker, Kant (1790), had argued against thinking of human action in terms of system because to do so is to deny human choice. A human cannot be thought of as a part of a system because a part only has meaning, as a part, if it fulfils the functioning of the system, not its own choices. However, Kant's strictures have been widely ignored and the notion of system found in the natural sciences has been imported into the human sciences of psychology, sociology, economics, and political and organisational theory. The notion of the 'group-as-a-whole is a reflection of this. Instead of directly importing notions from the complexity sciences, we need to treat them as a source domain for analogies with human action and in taking an analogy from one domain to another we have to add the attributes of the new domain.

The theory of complex responsive processes avoids thinking of human action in terms of systems for the reasons given above and focuses attention, instead, on direct human interaction. It seeks to understand the interaction between living bodies, characterised by consciousness, self-consciousness, the capacity for choosing, and the emotional need for each other. Such interaction is understood primarily in terms of the pragmatist sociology of George Herbert Mead (1934) and the process sociology of Norbert Elias (2000/1939), both of whom argue in the tradition of Hegel (1807). They provide explanations of human interaction which resonate strongly with the notions of self organisation and emergence to be found in the complexity sciences. In taking this perspective, we move fro speaking about complex adaptive systems to complex responsive processes of relating between human bodies.

Why might be the consequences for therapeutic practice? In moving to this perspective, the therapist's attention is shifted from an hypothesised hidden reality to the phenomena of human relationships themselves, to the patterns of interaction between people. We become concerned with the evolving pattern of relationships between people in the group in the present, particularly those aspects of which we are not conscious (for a development of how unconscious processes are thought about from this perspective see Stacey, 2005). A shift in perspective also provokes a rather different understanding of one's role as therapist. I will be commenting further on both of these aspects below.

The perspective of complex responsive processes is a theory of human *experience* which has a number of distinctive features. First, it is an action theory. It presents an understanding of human psychology and sociology in terms of the patterns of interaction between interdependent human bodies. Second, it is a temporal process theory that avoids the spatial metaphors of inside and outside and so avoids thinking about human action in

terms of internal worlds and external systems. Third, it is an evolutionary theory. I will briefly explain what I mean by each of these points, starting with the third.

The physiological basis of attachment and separation

A fundamental proposition of the theory of experience being presented here is that biological evolution has produced human bodies which need other human bodies, not as objects of drive discharge, but in a basic physiological sense. There is evidence to suggest that the human body requires *attachment to and separation from* other human bodies in order to regulate itself (Smith & Stevens, 1999). The human brain is excited, and this involves anxiety too, by the release of arousal hormones and calmed by the release of opioids. The two are linked to each other in that the release of arousal hormones tends to inhibit the release of opioids and vice versa. Furthermore, attachment to other human bodies triggers the release of opioids while separation from others triggers the release of arousal hormones. Together, attachment and separation behaviour, and opioid and arousal hormone release, constitute what Smith calls a hyper-cycle. An infant body requires attachment to, and separation from, others in order to sustain itself in a state that is neither too aroused / anxious nor too inactive / placid. Subsequent psychological maturation enables a person to perform much of the necessary attachment-separation on his or her own but never completely. In a real sense, then, biological evolution has produced social bodies. I would add that it is more complex than this because attachment to a feared or sexually desired other can be highly arousing, while separation from them could be very calming. However, the important idea of the complex, iterative link between the physiological and the social remains.

Furthermore, it is now well established that the great majority of the neuronal connections in the human brain are not present at birth but develop through subsequent experience and continue to change throughout life (Schore, 1994). Here again attachment and separation are fundamental, as indicated by studies showing that early traumas in relationships affect the formation of brain connections (Siegal, 1999). This brain plasticity means that biological evolution has produced human bodies characterised by a break in the rigid link between instinct and behaviour which is characteristic of other mammals. Elias (1989) pointed to the very small number of what he called species specific symbols in human action such as smiling, laughing and the categorical emotions. He argued that humans feel and act in ways that are little influenced by instinct, being shaped, instead, by social / cultural evolution. Even the expression of desire, and the desire to desire, is shaped by social interaction.

Complex responsive processes theory, then, is an evolutionary theory of human experience where what is evolving is the thematic patterning of interaction between interdependent people, that is, the social and individual identity at the same time, where that interdependence has a physiological foundation. This immediately establishes a radical difference, meaning a difference at its very roots, between this theory and psychoanalysis, evolutionary psychology (Gilbert & Bailey, 2000) and socio-biology (Wilson, 1992). All of the latter posit a strong link between instinct and human behaviour

and this leads to a view of the individual as biologically autonomous and usually fundamentally at odds with the social, which is seen as a constraint on the expression of the individual's instincts. In the theory of complex responsive processes, individuals are in no sense autonomous since their physiological regulation and brain development requires social interaction and their very identities are constituted in social processes. However, although individuals are not autonomous, they are unique because of their different histories of social interaction. Clearly, as a practitioner, if one moves from the psychoanalytic-systemic perspective to that of complex responsive process, one is less likely to focus on regression, on the individual or on the mother-infant relationship. Instead, one is more likely to focus on the thematic patterning of relationships between members in the living present and their connection to wider social patterns of relating, such as culture and class.

Power relations

In setting out the way in which the theory of complex responsive processes is an evolutionary theory, I have been pointing to how it is also an action theory of experience. I now want to develop this aspect. If one argues that human bodies *need* each other at a basic physiological level, one is immediately arguing that power is fundamental to human relating. This is because, in their interaction, human bodies are *enabling and constraining* each other at the same time and this is what power means. Furthermore, the need one person has of another is highly unlikely to be equal to the need that this other person has of him or her. Elias (2000/1939) argued very persuasively that power is a characteristic of all human relating and that, given unequal needs or desires, the power ratio is inevitably titled towards some and against others. He pointed to how patterns, or figurations, of power relations emerge in the interaction between people as they form groups and how these figurations evolve with changing needs and desires.

Elias (Elias & Scotson, 1994/1965) made very careful studies of how the formation of such figurations inevitably involved *inclusion and exclusion*. It is through inclusion in this group and exclusion from that group that each of us acquires our 'We' identity and this is inseparable from our 'I' identity. We have a fundamental need to belong to groups, to be recognised and loved by others, for without this we have no identity or self. In other words, individual selves are formed in processes of power relating, the social, while at the same time they are forming those patterns of power relations. However, acts of inclusion immediately involve acts of exclusion. 'We' identity arises just as much from the groups we are excluded from as it does from the ones we are included in. 'We' identity, therefore, immediately involves assertions and feelings of 'us' and 'them', an expression of ideology which is reinforced by gossip and unconsciously sustains the power ratio between groups. This ideologically based power ratio is sustained by homogenisation within a group and by emphasising difference between groups (Dalal, 1998; 2002) and is often expressed as idealisation of one's own group and denigration, rejection and hatred of other groups.

Threats of exclusion from one's own groups, and threats to the integrity of such groups posed by new entrants, are threats to identity, and such threats, therefore, provoke deep existential anxiety, triggering hatred and aggression. The perspective I am suggesting, therefore, sees love and hatred, dependence and independence, cooperation and competition / aggression as paradoxical aspects of the processes of social and self formation. There is then no need to think of groups as constituted by intrapsychic processes or as fundamentally regressive to infantile and primitive states. In terms of practice, the group therapist is therefore likely to focus on, and draw attention to, patterns of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the formation of, and threats to identity, all in the living present of the group in the wider social context. Note that the living present encompasses accounts of the past forming and being formed by expectations for the future as the basis of action in the present. This perfective encourages therapist to reflect upon their own position in the figurations of power in the group and the wider society, as well as the impact on their own 'We' identities, and the impact this has on their participation in the group.

What I am suggesting, then, is a dialectical theory of human experience, in Hegel's sense, in which the physiological, that is, the opposition of attachment and separation, is transformed as the psychological / sociological, namely, the opposition of enabling and constraining (power) relations between bodies and their patterning as inclusion-exclusion (identity). The argument is that human identity is emerging individually and collectively at the same time in the interaction, the experience of power relations, between human bodies.

What people are doing, as they form figurations of power relations, or groups, is communicating with each other and this involves another opposition, namely, that of understanding and misunderstanding. The oppositions between, on the one hand, attachment / enabling / inclusion, and on the other hand, separation / constraining / exclusion, are reflected in the opposition of understanding and misunderstanding, transformed as communicative interaction. Mead has argued cogently that it is in communicative interaction that consciousness and self consciousness, the human individual and the human social, arise at the same time.

Communicative interaction

Mead (1934) says that humans have central nervous systems that enable them to take the attitude, meaning the tendency to act, of the other. When one person gestures to another, this gesture calls forth, or evokes, a response from that other. Meaning, or understanding, is not located simply in the gesture but also, at the same time, in the response. Together, gesture and response are inseparable phases in one social act. So, when one person shouts at another, this could call forth a response of counter shouting and the meaning may be aggression. However, the shout of one could call forth laughter from the other so that the meaning may be ridicule or contempt. This continuous circular process of gesture and response is the social. A person can only be said to be conscious, if he is able to evoke in his own body a similar range of responses to those his gesture evokes in other bodies.

Only then can he potentially know what the meaning of his action might be. It is by engaging in a private role play with himself, just before, or while, he is gesturing that he can consciously choose his gestures in the light of the likely responses to them. Communication in language greatly enhances this capacity enabling the private role play to take on the form of silent conversation. Mind is this private role play / silent conversation, taking the form of gestures one directs to one's own body, calling forth responses in one's own body. Mind is the action of a body, a temporal process, and this concept of mind does not require the notion of representation or any notion of mind being inside anything.

Mind and the social are thus the same processes of bodily action, the only difference is that mind is private-silent while the social is public-vocal. Human minds are not possible without human societies and human societies are not possible without human minds. They form and are formed by each other in the same processes of communicative interaction and it is in this action sense that the individual is social through and through. Consciousness is a reflexive, social phenomenon. However, there is nothing socially deterministic about this. The possibility of taking the attitude of the other is not a guarantee of getting it right. The possibility of understanding opened up by consciousness will always also be accompanied by the possibility of misunderstanding. Human interaction is, therefore, processes of negotiating meaning.

Mead points out that self-consciousness is the capacity a subject has to take itself as an object to itself. As subject, 'I' can only be conscious of myself, that is, of 'me'. As soon as the 'I' reflects itself, it is immediately 'me'. This is Mead's 'I-me' dialectic, the inseparable relationship between 'I' and 'me' which is self-consciousness. However, the 'me' is the perceived gesture of the group / society to oneself as 'I'. One can only be self-conscious through taking the attitude, the tendency to act, of society to oneself. Self-consciousness is, therefore, a fundamentally social process which cannot be located in an autonomous individual. However, this is not some form of social determinism because Mead stressed the capacity of the 'I', as response to the 'me', for spontaneity. The 'I' does not have a programmed response to the gesture of society but can respond in different and often surprising ways. Spontaneity here does not mean impulse, but a skilful, reflective capacity to choose different responses, developed in a life history of interaction.

Generalisation in communicative interaction

Mead makes it clear that conscious and self-conscious communicative interaction is not restricted to the present face-to-face interaction of those communicating with each other. Communicative interaction is a thematic, narrative pattern that is iterated in each present as both repetition and potential transformation through the spontaneity involved in self-consciousness. In our interaction in the present, we are reproducing past patterns, although never in exactly the same way. I would link the possibility of such repetition to a central aspect of Mead's theory, namely, the human tendency to generalise. As people interact with each other they do not simply take the attitude of the specific others they are

currently interacting with. They also take the attitude of what Mead calls the 'generalised other', at the same time.

The generalised other is people in general in a group or society. Mead sometimes referred to this notion as taking the attitude of the game, the general way people interact in a particular kind of situation, such as exchanging goods on a market. In another formulation Mead (1938) referred to this notion as the 'social object'. He contrasted a social object with a physical object. While the latter is to be found in nature as a thing, the social object is only to be found in the particular experience of interacting. The social object is not a thing but tendencies on the part of large numbers of people to act in similar ways in similar situations. We each acquire the attitude of the group, the generalised tendencies to act of those around us, the attitude of the game, in the history of our interaction with others from infancy to death. It is important to stress that such generalisations do not exist anywhere but are generalised tendencies to act which have to be continually particularised in the specific contingent situations we find ourselves in, over and over again. It is in this sense that every interaction is history dependent but not historically determined because in each situation spontaneous responses are possible. Indeed, the processes of particularising the general are bound to be conflictual and generate misunderstanding as we negotiate what the general means in particular contingent interactions. Furthermore, it is in this conflictual negotiation with each other that the further evolution of social objects emerges through the amplification of small differences in understanding and misunderstanding. In other words, the global patterns of the general are continually emerging and evolving in the many, many particular, local interactions between people. This is the human form of self organisation / emergence.

If in every interaction with each other, members of a therapy group are making particular the attitude of the generalised other, the social object, the society, then focusing attention on individual intrapsychic processes, on childhood patterns and mother-infant relationships, will be highly limiting. The challenge for the therapist becomes one of participating in the group so as to widen and deepen communication through attending to the manner in which the generalised other, the social object, is being made particular in the group and the outside lives of group members.

Idealisation and communicative interaction

Mead (1923) also emphasised the capacity humans have for idealising their generalisations. He pointed to how people have a tendency to individualise and idealise a collective and treat it 'as if' *it* had overriding motives or values, amounting to a process in which the collective constitutes a 'cult'. Members of 'cults' forget the 'as if' nature of their construct and act in a manner driven by the cult's values. Cults are maintained when leaders present to people's imagination a future free from obstacles that could prevent them from being what they all want to be, providing a feeling of enlarged personality in which individuals participate and from which they derive their value as persons and often justify the terrible actions they take. A 'cult' directly applies cult values as universal norms abstracted from daily life and individuals must conform unless they are to be

judged as selfish or sinful and excluded from the group. *Cult values* emerge in the historical evolution of any group or institution, to which they are ascribed, and they can be negative ideals but also positive ones, such as family values and democracy. It is important to stress this because one cult value could be 'love thy neighbour' and another could be 'destroy unclean races'. What for one group is an idealisation is denigration for another.

However, instead of being directly applied in a way that enforces the conformity of a cult, cult values can become *functional values* in the everyday interactions between people in a group. For example, the cult value of a hospital might be to 'provide each patient with the best possible care'. However, such a cult value has to be repeatedly functionalised in many unique specific situations throughout the day. As soon as cult values become functional values in real daily interaction, conflict arises and it is this conflict that must be negotiated by people in their practical interaction with each other (Griffin, 2002).

What implication does this have for the practice of therapy? Once again, it shifts attention from the dyad and intrapsychic processes to the social processes of idealisation. As therapist, one is therefore encouraged to pay attention to such phenomena as they manifest in the group. These ideas might also provoke reflection on one's own profession grouping. Do we form cults? How to we functionalise our cult values?

Here, then we have another set of oppositions – *generalising and particularising, idealising-denigrating and functionalising*, transformed as social processes of conflict and negotiation. Understanding the role that generalisation / idealisation-denigration plays in human interaction is thus crucial. Generalising is a process of experiencing similarity and regularity in patterns of interaction in the present, that persist, usually over long time periods, as habit. But this is not simply habit because it involves an ongoing process of imaginatively constructing a sense of unity in experience, a matter to be taken up in the next section, which deals with choice and intention.

Choice and evaluation

People can choose their responses to others because they have the capacity for taking the attitude of others and such choice involves evaluation. The evaluative criteria for the choices people make are provided by norms and values and these too are social phenomena.

Joas (2000) distinguishes between norms and values. For him, *norms* are criteria for judging desires and actions. They are *obligatory and constraining* criteria and so restrict opportunities for action. They are intimately connected with morals in that they provide criteria for what *ought* to be done, what is *right*. Elias (2000/1939) was particularly concerned with how norms emerge and evolve as people in a society become more and more interdependent and as the use of violence is monopolised by the state. He explained how desires are taken more and more behind the scenes of daily life as more detailed

norms emerge about what can and cannot be done in public. These norms become aspects of individual personality structures and adherence to such norms is sustained by the social process of shame.

However, norms are inseparable, although different, from *values*. Joas draws on Dewey (1934) to argue that *values* are general and durable criteria for judging desires, norms and actions. Values are criteria that are *attractive and compelling in a voluntary, committed sense*. Values give life meaning and purpose, and so are not experienced as restrictive. They are the highest expression of our free will, presenting a paradox of compulsion and voluntary commitment at the same time. Values are inspiring motivations to act toward the *good* (ethics), which arise, and continue to be iterated, in particularly intense experiences of social interaction as inescapable aspects of self formation and self transcendence. Such experience takes hold of peoples' imaginations and the experience is idealised in the imaginative construction of a 'whole' which does not exist and never will but which seems real because we have experienced it so intensely. This is not an illusion or a fantasy but, rather, the experience of value and value commitment.

What 'whole' means here is the felt continuity and coherence, the felt unity, of experience. Each individual is born into ongoing processes of human interaction in which the felt unity of generalisations / idealisations-denigrations, as imaginative 'wholes', are iterated in each present as each individual learns throughout life, providing the basis of the values according to which they act. Values are not deliberate choices, indeed, they are experienced as not of our positing. Although values have general and durable qualities, their motivational impact on action must be negotiated afresh, must be particularised, in each action situation involving the spontaneous discrimination of the 'I'. It follows that values are contingent upon the particular action situations in which we find ourselves.

The basis of individual choices, from this perspective, is thus fundamentally social. The criteria for evaluation are, at the same time, both *obligatory restrictions* taking the form of what ought and ought not to be done (norms) and *voluntary compulsions*, taking the form of what it is good to do (values). Emotions, such as shame and fear of punishment or exclusion, provide the main constraining force with regard to norms, while feelings of being recognised and feeling worthy act as positive reinforcers. Emotions such as gratitude, humility, altruism, guilt and feelings of self worth provide the voluntary, compelling force of value experiences, as does hatred and contempt for other groups.

While the separation of values and norms is an aid to understanding, it is an abstraction from lived, practical experience in which they are inseparable aspects of the criteria for choosing actions. Together, norms and values constitute ideology, which emerges and continues to evolve in the very same bodily interactions that constitute the social and the self at the same time. Both norms and values, as criteria for choosing actions, form and are formed by the self which forms and is formed by the social, all at the same time. Again, we have an opposition, this time of *voluntary compulsion and obligatory restriction* transformed as ideology.

However, there is no such thing as the autonomous individual or purely individual choice, simply because humans are interdependent. Instead, there is the interplay of individual choices and this means that individuals must continually negotiate and adjust the choices they are making in a particular situation, that is, with a particular group of people in a particular place at a particular time. By the interplay of choices, then, I mean a necessarily contingent, conflictual negotiation of differences in which the general / ideal-denigrated is made particular. This involves individual spontaneity and the potential for the amplification of differences, and thus the evolution of identity. Narrative patterns of experience, including norms-values-ideologies, as well as the outcomes of actions, all emerge in the interplay of choices in local interactions.

A shift to this way of thinking has implications for therapeutic practice. It encourages the therapist to focus attention on the norms, values and ideologies of the wider society as they manifest in group interaction. It also encourages communities of therapeutic practitioners to reflect together on their own norms, values and ideologies and the impact these have on their practice.

Threats to identity and the consequences of anxiety

I have used the word *normally* in the above description in order to signal that there is nothing inevitable or determined about the interplay of human choices in processes of particularising generalisations and idealisations-denigrations. Furthermore, as already mentioned, sometimes the interplay of choices does not take the form of particularisation. The reason for this has to do with anxiety. The normal processes of particularising are blocked when threats of destruction / fragmentation to individual-collective identities prompt existential anxiety and fears of exclusion and separation. The unconscious response is to strengthen ties of attachment and inclusion to preserve identity. Furthermore, the process of communication inevitable involves misunderstanding, the process of power relating inevitable involves exclusion and the process of particularising the generalisation / idealisation-denigration inevitably involves conflict. All of these are existential threats to identity, and thus human survival, and so are bound to arouse anxiety.

An immediate response to such anxiety is obviously aggression but, perhaps less obviously, an unconscious pressure for homogenisation and conformity to the group from which people derive their identities. This amounts to rigidly applying ideological 'wholes' to contingent interaction. If people in a group rigidly apply the ideological 'whole' to their interactions in all specific, contingent situations they co-create fascist power relations and cults, characterised by collective ecstasies, and high levels of dependency and aggression, which alienate people from their ordinary everyday experience. Alternatively, if the ideological 'whole' is so fragmented that there is little generalised tendency to act, then people will be interacting in ways that are almost entirely contingent on the situation, resulting in anarchy. The consequence is that further evolution is blocked in both cases. However, when people particularise / functionalise some ideological 'wholes' in contingent situations, a conflictual process of negating the

whole, then further evolution is possible. Such particularisation always involves critical reflection, richer and deeper communication, and the spontaneity in which differences can be amplified. But they are all processes that are particularly uncomfortable and so quickly arouse existential anxiety which can easily block evolution. The practical implication is to notice the wider dimensions of anxiety. Rigid, neurotic behaviour may then come to be understood as reposes to threats to identity, for example, when people are evicted from the organisation they belong to.

Now consider how one might think about both very large groups, crowds, and small groups from this perspective.

The crowd and the 'group-as-a-whole'

Increasing numbers make it more difficult for people to negotiate differences so that the processes of particularisation become more and more difficult, eventually impossible. The interplay of interdependent individual choices then becomes characterised by the process of direct application of the imaginative 'wholes' of generalisations and idealisations-denigrations. It is not that people have lost their autonomy since they were not autonomous in the first place. It is not that they have lost their individuality, but rather, that in the experience of being in a crowd, interdependent individuals have no other way of going on together than unconsciously choosing actions in conformity with an imaginative 'whole'. A crowd is akin to a temporary cult with a fascist power structure. Now we cannot say that this automatically, of itself, is either good or bad, mature of primitive, only that it is an intense experience of value. There will be different views on whether a particular incidence of crowd behaviour is good or bad, mature or regressed. All we can say is that the crowd is a potentially volatile experience because the constraints provided by particularisation are largely absent.

For example, the crowd of nearly one million people who took to the streets of London in early 2001 to protest against the Iraq war cannot sensibly be understood as a group of people who had regressed to a primitive state in which they had lost their individuality. I argue that this crowd is more sensibly understood as an expression of a very intense experience of value, which they and a great many others would judge to be good. However, crowds leaving a football ground and going on a rampage of violence and looting, could also be said to be engaged in an intense experience of value in which they are pitting one team, one imaginative 'whole' against another. Most people would regard an experience of value involving violence as bad. But I cannot see, even here, how it aids understanding to regard this as regression to the primitive in which individuality is lost. All members of this crowd, even as they participate in its actions, are still members of an advanced modern society, who have individual responsibility for what they are doing. Most football spectators do not engage in this behaviour even though they may be caught up in the crowd. Furthermore, violence does not break out in every crowd leaving a football match. There is nothing inevitably bad or primitive about a football crowd. For both the demonstration and the football cases, I would not understand the crowd as an individual writ large and crowd behaviour in terms of intrapsychic processes of

projection and regression, or as contagion or ecstasy. Instead, I understand a crowd as a social phenomenon where the interplay of individual choices takes the form of direct application of generalisations / idealisations-denigrations rather than the form of particularisation.

From a complex responsive processes perspective, one thinks about the small group in much the same way. When, for example, a group-analytic therapist assesses a number of people and invites some of them to become members of her therapy group, she is taking up in her interactions with them a social object, that is, generalised tendencies to act, and an idealisation, or cult value, known as group analysis, particularising them in specific assessment situations. When members of the group assemble for their first meeting they interact in a manner characterised by some degree of empathy/attunement in their face-to-face interaction with each other and, at the same time, by the particularising of the generalisations / idealisations-denigrations of the various other groups and of the society they belong to. As they do so, thematic patterns of communication and power relations emerge that organise their experience of being together. They develop a narrative history of being together. Normally, they fairly rapidly develop an experience of belonging to that specific group in which they begin to generalise the therapeutic, or otherwise, patterns of their interaction. They begin to feel a continuity and unity in their experience, the imaginative construction of a 'whole', which they may feel to be not of their own positing even though it is they who are socially constructing it. Frequently, they come to idealise and denigrate this imaginative construct and perhaps even ascribe to it some imaginative form of 'agency'. They may even come to feel that 'it' has a mind of its own. The key point is that this imaginative construct is neither an illusion nor a reality in a naturalistic sense; rather, it is a social object, even a cult value. Normally members particularise, in each session, this social object or cult value.

However, when threats to identity, frightening conflicts and fears of exclusion arise, they experience heightened feelings of anxiety. This leads to the obliteration of differences, to homogenisation, which blocks the processes of particularisation with the result that the imaginative 'whole' is taken up in their interactions in a rigid manner and experienced as an agency. The group then takes on characteristics akin to a fascist power structure and cult with its powerful pressure for conformity. The thematic patterning of interaction may then take the form of scapegoating nonconformists, uniting against denigrated external enemies, dependency on an idealised leader. In other words, the patterns of interaction take the form of what Bion called basic assumptions, except now they are understood not as pathological intrapsychic processes writ large, as regression to primitive psychic states, but as normal social responses to anxiety which may sometimes be highly destructive and truly horrendous. They are not understood in terms of an external system which is making people powerless but as a co-construction for which members must take responsibility. What they need to take responsibility for is the rigid patterns of power and value which they are co-creating.

Does this difference in explanation matter as far as the work of the therapist is concerned? I argue that the explanation one has in mind as one works as therapist does have an effect on how one participates in the group. From the complex responsive

processes perspective, the therapist cannot be other than a fully participating member of the group. The therapist may think he is not a full participant and may act in a withdrawn manner, thinking of himself as operating from the 'boundary'. However, this is a form of full participation evoking responses from others just as any other form of participation does. The responses will be different to those evoked by other modes of participation but they are not different in kind. This does not mean that all members are the same. No member will participate in exactly the same way as any other. In a sense, each member takes up a somewhat different role in the group and the pattern of power relations is tilted toward some and away from others, although this will vary over time. The therapist takes a particular role, which involves not contributing his life story or current activities outside the group but rather pays undivided attention to the other members. By virtue of professional training and having assembled the group, the therapist finds the power ratio tilted towards him and this is exacerbated by the particular role he takes up. However, this is, nevertheless, not a difference in kind and it is an illusion to imagine that one is at some 'boundary' or operating as a 'container' of anxiety.

Instead, in accordance with the group-analytic approach, the therapist understands her role as that of facilitating communication in the group, in Foulkes' words, 'widening and deepening communication'. I would argue that in order to do this, the therapist draws attention to the general thematic patterns that seem to be emerging in the interaction between members and particularly to the differences in the ways members are forming and being formed by these patterns. The therapist is seeking to draw attention to the particularising, in the living present, of the generalisations / idealisations-denigrations being iterated. The purpose is to try to amplify the differences as the means of enriching communication and of shifting rigid (neurotic) patterns of interaction. This amounts to working on the basis that any sense of continuity and unity in experience, any sense of the imaginative 'whole', is only to be found in its particularisation in the living present. This means that one focuses attention on the actual patterns of interaction that people are engaging in.

From this perspective, the therapist avoids interpretations to do with the generalisation, the imaginative 'whole', because they may well reinforce the feeling of some 'agency' beyond members' own positing that is acting upon them, so relieving them of taking responsibility for what they are doing. Instead, the therapist is encouraging himself and others to reflect on just how they are taking up generalisations and cult values in their interaction, seeking always to amplify differences. The aim is to encourage members to take responsibility for what they are co-creating, individually and collectively. If heightened anxiety is being reflected in the suppression of difference in cult-like conformity, the work of the therapist is to point to this. The therapist is negating, or deconstructing, any experience of a 'whole'.

When making 'group-as-a-whole' interpretations, that is, hypothesising projected intrapsychic processes, the therapist can easily appear as an expert on 'the unconscious' and so exacerbate already large power differences and increase unhelpful dependency, which can infantilise and even confuse members. In my experience of being at the receiving end of them, 'group-as-a-whole' interpretations help to create a rather

mysterious sense of an actual agency with the potential for sustaining cult-like interactions. My experience of being in groups where the therapist / consultant adheres strictly to 'group-as-a-whole' interpretations, often sounding highly fanciful to my ears, is one of being caught up in a rather mysterious, cultish activity. Any attempt at countering this is interpreted as denial or resistance, trapping one into conforming to the interpretation. From the perspective I am suggesting, the role of the group therapist is to actively question and undermine such modes of participation.

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