'Impossible Groups that Flourish in Leaking Containers'—Challenging Group Analytic Theory

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> Alice laughed. 'There's no use trying,' she said. 'One can't believe impossible things.'
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> 'I daresay you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.' (Lewis Carroll, 1897, Through the Looking Glass: 102)

All group therapy textbooks emphasize the importance of the setting for a successful outcome of the group. This setting includes clear boundaries of time and space, stable participation, and good leadership. All are seen as requirements to create a safe enough environment for participants to work on deep issues. In addition, for its normal development and progress, the group is expected to go through a stormy stage with disagreements and conflicts.

My article will highlight groups that do not follow such 'rules'. Surprisingly, the members are still able to work at deep levels, create intimate relationships, and benefit from the group. How is this possible? Should we change our theories? I link the success of these groups to the secure presence (Neeman-kantor, 2013, researching outdoor groups of wives of Israeli soldiers who suffer from war PTSD) of the leader and the imagined internalized group that the members create. Applying field theory explains how a multi-unconscious-fantasy makes these impossible groups possible.

Introduction

In 2004, as part of the preparations for the IAGP group therapy International conference that I co-chaired in Brazil two years later, my wife and I were sent all over Brazil to promote the conference. In a straw hut in a favela (a poor neighbourhood) in Fortaleza we were invited to witness Adalberto Barreto doing what he titled 'community therapy', a new kind of group therapy. About 30 people were present in the meeting we attended, most of them favela inhabitants. Many issues of boundaries and confidentiality were very different from what I do in my practice. People went in and out, children were included (sometimes trying to sell us postcards), the whole event was recorded (probably for research purposes, but as far as I noticed without asking the people's permission), and hostesses entered with some refreshment and a drink during the session. Still it seemed that the participants were not troubled by the boundary violations. I was surprised at the depth of personal problems presented. I expected that in community therapy people would talk about problems of the community, but they presented the same problems I see in my therapy groups. A woman talked about her daughter who had a relationship with a married man who became violent when the daughter decided to leave him. One day he drugged the mother and she found herself naked in bed with him. Another person was a physician who worked in the community and was told by the authorities to stop working for the poor. The third speaker had learning difficulties and said that only half of his brain functioned. His friend came with him to help in case he forgot to say something important.

How can such a group session become possible? This group setting negated everything I taught, about the need for boundaries or safety in groups, and still it seemed as if a high level of self-disclosure developed. In my group analytic practice and my professional activities as a group therapist, supervisor and educator, I have encountered many group situations that do not follow the 'rules' described in the textbooks. In some, the setting is quite different from what is recommended in theory as seen above, while others do not follow the developmental stages that the books detail. Under these conditions, we would not expect members of the group to feel safe enough to open up, nor that the group will be able to work through deep issues. Nevertheless, surprisingly, under the right leadership, these groups seem to progress into advanced stages. It is as if they flourish in leaking containers (I borrowed this term from Durban, Lazar and Ofer's 1993 article about the cracked container). How does this happen? Should we change or adjust our theories? Please pay attention. I am not advocating that people design impossible groups. I am interested in exploring how impossible groups that already exist function and what makes them, in fact, possible.

Basic Conditions for Group Progress

In preparation for this article I reviewed all the textbooks on group psychotherapy I know, to see what they write about the 'minimal' necessary conditions for conducting a group. I was surprised not to find such explicit written conditions. For years I have taught group therapy, supervised and consulted to junior therapists. I have always insisted that,

first and foremost, we need to establish safety in our groups, usually through managing the group boundaries. I was sure that those conditions would be written clearly in the introductory chapter of every book. However, I did not find it very easily at first. Is it only my own bias that groups need these elementary conditions of safety? Perhaps it means that the scholars who wrote those books knew that it is not so clear-cut and that some groups can develop well, although they do not fulfil some 'minimal requirements'? Here is what I did find in the textbooks:

Foulkes and Anthony (1984) describe the 'main tools' with which we achieve therapeutic goals in groups: encouraging the relaxation of censorship, 'frank disclosure of personal feelings and experience, and of feelings toward other members of the group' (1984: 57), and active membership. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) also emphasize the importance of self-disclosure as a prerequisite for the formation of meaningful interpersonal relationships in a group. They bring research evidence that supports the importance of self-disclosure for the success of the group since high self-disclosure increases group cohesiveness, which is one of the main factors contributing to therapeutic positive results. It goes without saying that self-disclosure (unless uncontrolled, which is not recommended and might even be a sign of pathology) develops in a safe environment. Exposing deep issues or secrets about oneself when the situation is unsafe is highly risky and actually reveals poor reality-testing. However, as we saw in the example above and as we will see later, in many groups people

are ready to self-disclose under what look like very unsafe conditions. How is this possible?

After digging deeper I found that Yalom (1995) clearly states the forces that threaten group cohesiveness: 'continued tardiness, absences, subgrouping, disruptive extra-group socialization, and scapegoating, all threaten the integrity of the group' (Yalom, 1995: 107). Foulkes and Anthony also write that 'arriving punctually and attending regularly are important therapeutic pointers' (1984: 68). I will describe later groups with tardiness, absences, subgrouping and extra-group socialization that thrive in these leaking containers. How come?

In another textbook of Rutan, Stone and Shay, *Psychodynamic Group Psychotherapy* (2007), we can find 'A major role task is management of boundaries: The challenge for the therapist is to create flexible boundaries that can ensure the integrity of the group but are not so loose that structure and safety are sacrificed' (2007: 35). 'The therapist has the fundamental task of creating these boundaries, monitoring them for violations, and deciding how to respond to them in order to preserve the function and safety of the group' (2007: 196). Perhaps this is the ideal task of the group analyst, but what happens when the group members persistently come late or are absent because of the requirements of their job and not due to inner struggles? Can safety still be established? Can the group still function well under those faulty circumstances? Should we conduct groups at all under such problematic conditions?

I want to emphasize that the idea of safety is sometimes overrated or even misused by group members. 'I don't feel safe here', said a participant in my group. When I asked her what made her feel unsafe she mentioned a conflict that two group members recently had. Exploring it further, she associated it with the combative atmosphere in her family of origin, where conflicts were never resolved and it usually felt unsafe. Now, does it mean that we should create a 'perfect' safe environment for this woman to 'correct' her faulty childhood atmosphere, or should we establish a 'bad enough' playground to allow her to explore those early experiences in a relatively safe place? What is this 'good enough' and relatively safe space?

This question has both practical and theoretical implications. We can easily say that any disruption of the optimal conditions of the group function is just 'grist for the mill', but from a practical point of view, when do we decide that the diversion from those conditions does not allow the group to develop and prosper? Since good practice should always be based on good theory we should explain how group members can still benefit from impossible groups and what allows for their development and success. But first, let me introduce several kinds of groups that do not 'follow the rules'.

Examples of 'Impossible' Groups

The many examples that I have include demonstration groups; Institute groups at the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA); resident groups where members do not attend meetings regularly; non-

western groups where the culture does not allow a stormy stage; groups that function well in times of war and terror, inpatient groups in a psychiatric ward in which the membership changes from one session to another (and indeed Yalom (1995) developed a specific model based on a one session intervention), and Internet groups where the boundaries are incredibly loose. However, due to space limitations, I address only some of these examples.

Training Groups with Frequent Absences and Tardiness

As I mentioned above, both Foulkes and Anthony (1984) and Yalom (1995) agree that arriving punctually and attending regularly is crucial for healthy functioning of the group. Absences and tardiness disrupt the group's stability and threaten its safe boundaries. One of the main tasks of the group conductor is to manage the group boundaries, whether by interpreting the lateness or frequent absences or by reminding the group of its agreements or contract. However, what do you do when the group is unable to follow such an agreement due to the organization in which it exists? Training groups (T-groups) or process groups for psychiatric residents can be good examples for such impossible groups:

Process groups are offered to psychiatric residents in some psychiatric programmes (48% according to Gans, Rutan and Wilcox, 1995) although it is much less common now in the United States. The purpose of these groups range from providing therapy to helping the residents deal with the enormous stresses associated with psychiatric studies, to learning from experience about leading therapy groups. From the

beginning, these groups suffer from problematic boundary issues both between therapy and training and between personal and professional relationships. The residents have pre-existing professional and personal relationships, continue to meet between the sessions as part of their training and studies, and are part of a larger system, the psychiatric training programme of the medical school (although ideally, the T-group leaders have a non-reporting relationship to the faculty who are responsible for evaluating the residents' progress). In some programmes, participation in those groups is mandatory (Dale Godby and his team from Dallas lead such groups), while in others it is not, making the time management quite difficult: 'In a training programme members of the faculty invariably contend for trainees' time. Encroachment on the time of the training group can easily become a problem' (Swiller, Lang and Halperin, 1993: 538). Here, I will introduce the case of a resident process group that I co-led where participation was voluntary and focus on the issue of unstable attendance.

Vignette

The members of the process group I co-led in a psychiatry programme came from all the years of studies, from the 1st to the 4th year of that programme. In the first year they rotate between hospital departments in order to accumulate experience in various medical areas. In some of these wards (e.g. when they are working in the internal medicine department for two months out of their first year), they have almost no control over their time and are not allowed to leave their post. Even in later years, when they treat psychiatric patients, they are not always masters of their

time as they have to deal with patients in crisis, supervisors who do not understand or agree that the process group time boundaries should take priority, etc. This meant that frequently many of them could not come on time and we usually started the group with three to six of the 10 members with the rest arriving five to 10 minutes later.

These conditions created situations where participation in the group was unstable. I felt more and more frustrated by the situation. Although I knew that they were not to blame as they did not have a lot of control over their time, I felt de-skilled and that my professional ability to interpret this attack on the group time boundaries was taken away. I felt helpless, probably a reflection of their feelings working in that system. At one point, when I could not tolerate my frustration any more, I blasted the group with one of my worst–best interventions:

> This is so frustrating! It is one of the worst group settings I've ever had! I don't remember leading a group with so many absences and late-comers. How can you connect deeply when you do not know who will be here next week? Don't you feel that it limits your ability to use this group? It limits mine . . .

Silence fell upon the group after this harsh intervention. The group seemed paralysed for a while, so I asked, 'perhaps you want to share your feelings around what I said'. A discussion developed around *how* I intervened, and I acknowledged and took responsibility for my impulsivity. After processing their reactions for some time, one of the members said: 'I actually agree with you. Sometimes I wonder whether we are making

enough effort to be on time. When some of the members come late, I feel irritated as if they do not take the group seriously enough'. A discussion followed about how much responsibility and control they did have. A woman said with tears: 'I am trying hard to be a good student, a good resident, but I feel as if nothing I do will be enough. Don't you see that I am doing my best?' Later, she associated those feelings to her family of origin where she never felt that she fulfilled her father's expectations. The group conductors reflected the dilemma of the residents being in a demanding system that swallows their time and energy, making them feel helpless, powerless and under relentless scrutiny, and I pointed out how I was caught in a parallel process.

This example shows that even under conditions that hinder the group progress, group members can touch deep issues and do meaningful work. I have many more examples from this specific group, which actually originated my idea of 'impossible groups'. There were powerful moments and significant events, showing that, surprisingly, the participants felt safe enough to disclose and process their inner experience and their relationships with each other and the group conductors, as happens in any other group.

Demonstration Groups

In the only article I know written about demonstration groups, Gans, Rutan and Lape (2002) state:

> A demonstration group is comprised of mental health
> professionals and/or trainees (usually between six and
> eight) who volunteer to be members of a group to be

conducted by a senior group therapist in front of an observing group of students, peers, and colleagues. The demonstration group usually meets only once, though on occasion it may meet several times throughout the course of a workshop or conference with the added benefit of viewing leadership style and group dynamics in further developmental stages. (Gans, Rutan and Lape 2002: 234)

Demonstration (demo) groups are quite common at the AGPA conferences in the USA and in group therapy training institutes as a way to learn about groups by observing a live group.

There are many conditions that seem to hinder such a group's progress: the physical group boundaries consist of a circle of chairs with no walls defining the group space and a very permeable membrane exists between the demonstration group and the observers. The audience is observing and listening to everything that the members of the group say or do, so confidentiality is threatened. The audience is composed of colleagues who have professional relationships with the volunteers, so the group members' ability to be authentic is restricted. There are pre-existing relationships between members of the demo group and between them and the observing group, so many dual relationships are present. The time allocated for such a demonstration is very short (a session can be as short as 45 minutes), so there is no time for deep group dynamics to develop. Even Gans, Rutan and Lape conclude: 'Boundary issues in demonstration groups can be so complex and confusing that some wonder if effective teaching is even possible' (2002: 240).

Let us examine a vignette from such a demo group:

At the beginning of the demo group, members expressed their wish to connect with one another. The group conductor suggested that they explore how they want to do that. The first attempts were quite awkward and it seemed as if something blocked them from getting to know one another. The conductor pointed out how difficult it was to get closer with everyone watching and that they might feel very exposed. He empathized with the difficulty and normalized it. Then, in a surprising turn, an older man addressed a young woman, saying that he liked the way she was dressed and was actually sexually attracted to her. The group was shocked and embarrassed. The group conductor asked the woman how she felt and she responded that she felt intruded on and not complimented. She told the man that it felt almost like sexual harassment as he did not know her at all, objectified her and only related to her sexually. The man apologized and became silent for a while. Other group members joined, sharing their emotional reactions ranging from feeling that this man was brave and authentic, to feeling that he 'forced' himself on the woman. Then the man broke his silence and said: 'I feel very lonely here. It reminds me that I actually feel lonely in my life as well and sometimes, in order to break out of this loneliness, I jump too quickly and sexualize my relationships with women'.

Assuming that this man's reactions were authentic, that he was not an exhibitionist, and no more disturbed than most of us (and of course, these assumptions might be questioned), I would like to ask: How could he

feel safe enough to express his attraction to the young woman? What allowed for his surprising self-disclosure about sexualizing relationships, in front of his colleagues? What enabled him to expose his loneliness in public? And, assuming that his long silence was evidence of an inner process that led to the insight about his defence against loneliness, how could he reach this insight in such an impossible group?

You might say that this is an exceptional example, however, from my first experiences leading demo groups, I have been surprised how frequently such incidents occur in such situations. I am always impressed by the powerful demonstrations that I observe or lead and know that such incidents are very common. We might explain these cases as a kind of 'role responsiveness' or even 'role suction', but it means that the group dynamics created in demo groups are so powerful that they suck mature people very quickly into behaviours they cannot control. However, I am not certain that this is a sufficient explanation.

Internet Groups

As some of you might know, I have written about online groups for years, starting with one of the first published articles about online group dynamics in 2001 (Weinberg, 2001) and continuing with a book called *Alone in the Presence of Virtual Others* (Weinberg, 2014). Although I discuss Internet forums more than therapy groups, some of my conclusions are valid for online therapy groups as well. It is clear that Internet forums (such as the GASi forum or my g-p one) have no solid space or time boundaries, as the writer can send his/her message any time, and it is

received by colleagues around the globe with no geographical limitations. Under these boundless circumstances, it is hard to believe that people will self-disclose and be open as they usually do in our groups. According to any theory of group therapy and group processes, the lack of clear boundaries on the Internet should restrict the possibility of group cohesion, reduce the sense of safety, and limit intimate talk. However, research (e.g. McKenna et al., 2002) shows that people tend to reveal more in virtual communication than in a face-to-face meeting. Self-disclosure is surprisingly high despite loose boundaries and a flexible setting in the Internet forum and online discussion lists.

As an example, let me bring an exchange of emails (with permission) from my group psychotherapy (g-p) discussion forum, when one of our members lost his baby shortly after birth:

> My heart is broken—words can't convey the grief, and I realize only now that the depth of this pain is beyond comprehension. I feel waves of horrible sadness and utter bewilderment. I'm sure that anger will come, though it has not yet shown itself. (Personal communication, g-p discussion list, 2 July 2000)

And here are some of the responses that followed his email emotionally sharing condolences and personal losses. 'Tears are falling as I write this, this "wet strength" reflecting the passion of your connection to and loss of your new-born son (Personal communication, g-p discussion list, 2 July 2000).' 'I have not been responding to the many threads that have been

happening here—but, your post arrested me. I grieve with you. I cannot imagine a deeper pain than that associated with the loss of a child (Personal communication, g-p discussion list, 3 July 2000).'

This kind of communication is not very different from any empathic resonance that happens in a cohesive group that functions well. One explanation for this phenomenon can be that it is due to the anonymity of the members in these forums, which reduces the risks of ridicule or rejection of people disclosing personal information, similar to the 'stranger in the train' phenomenon. However, the above excerpt is taken from a professional forum where colleagues are personally identified by their names, and many of them know one another through meeting in group therapy conferences. My observation is that such self-disclosure happens in forums where members do not disguise their identity and are not anonymous. Actually, the potential of the Internet to blur the boundaries between reality and fantasy, body and mind, is perceived not only as increasing the potential for self-expression, but also as symbolizing the freedom of the human spirit, unbounded by space and time, just like the virtual forum.

If you insist that Internet forums, limited to communicating in text, are too detached from and cannot be compared to the real experience in group therapy sessions, let me present another example which is closer to therapy group: online process groups using video. In the last year I started research comparing these kind of groups to face-to-face (f2f) ones. I direct a doctorate programme focused on group therapy at the Professional

School of Psychology in California, a programme integrating distance learning and f2f workshops. Our students attend a two-day intensive process group, followed by monthly two-hour online meetings.

I use an application that allows people to see one another on the screen, all simultaneously, each in a boxed frame. Now that you understand how it works, here is a short transcript from a group meeting:

> **Clary:** I want to tell you Sharon, that you evoked in me two very strong feelings. The first one was great sadness, because I heard you talking about some lack of belonging. Something in your tone felt very sad. The other thing I felt was some kind of admiration. Admiration for your amazing courage. And then I ask myself and you, what do you want? I mean what do you want from us as a group? What do you want from me? Do you want to get closer to me? Do you want to feel part of the group? I look at you and I cannot get what you want from me or from the group. I really wonder why I do not feel or do not understand you? Do you understand what I mean?
>
> **Sharon:** Yes. I identify with what you say and I want to put a big question mark on what Sheila labelled as my calmness. I have a lot of questions too. I think that when I get closer and give myself, I can be injured. I am constantly guarding myself, probably too much. It is too much effort to stay connected all the time.
>
> **Rebecca:** I have to tell you, Sharon, that when I'm with you I do not feel that it is too much effort for you to be with one person. It is more difficult for you in the group.

> **Sharon:** Beautiful and true. It's a discovery I found
> out lately, that it is a lot easier for me in one on one
> relationship where I am less perceived as 'a witch'.

Is this vignette taken from a regular f2f meeting or from an online meeting? Is it not the kind of interaction and feedback we expect to find in a process or therapy group in an advanced stage? If I have not told you that this vignette is taken from the online group, you would probably never have guessed it.

In a workshop I co-conducted at the AGPA about online groups, we sent the participants to their hotel rooms asking them to connect through their tablets or laptops for an online demo group co-conducted by the workshop leaders. The participants expressed their wish to connect with one another despite the barriers, and found an original way to overcome the online limitations by attaching their palms to the boundary of their picture on the screen, creating the illusion of touching the hand of the other member in the nearby boxed picture.

Interestingly enough, just two days before I conducted this workshop, I had seen the play *'the curious incident of the dog in the middle of the night'*, describing the inner world of an adolescent with Autistic/Asperger features. As he could not tolerate people touching him, his parents learned how to connect with him in a creative way. I was fascinated to see how in both cases, whether due to physical/psychological or to group setting limitations, people find the same creative way to connect and overcome the difficulties.

When the Group Container is Attacked by Reality

Sometimes the group container is attacked from the outside, by harsh reality. This is especially true nowadays in times of ubiquitous terror and in countries affected by war. When terror events threaten group members from the outside, it is hard to expect that they will be able to playfully reflect on the events in the group. I remember a one-day process group that I conducted for therapists the day after the horrible terror attacks in Paris in November 2015. The group took place in a nearby European country, and I started it after not sleeping all night long, listening to the news and trying to deal with my own anxiety.

At the beginning of the group, I suggested that we all agree to confidentiality, as I usually do. All the members agreed, except for one person. This is very uncommon for therapists and other group members reacted with irritation and puzzlement. When asked for his reasons, he explained agreeing to confidentiality was just a ritual, and nobody knows what will really happen. As the group went on it was stuck in the schizo-paranoid position, full of distrust and suspicion, and even when they had moments of more closeness and warmth, they immediately withdrew again to distance and isolation. For me it was clear that the group (including the person who disagreed with the confidentiality agreement, whom we can easily label the defiant leader) was reacting to the dangerous outside world, and I interpreted the group atmosphere accordingly. However, the collapse of the potential space could not be stopped, and group members could not reflect and see the events in the

group as symbolic. They really perceived the defiant leader as a potential terrorist threatening their well-being and even existence.

This example of a failure of the group analyst to compensate for the leaking container, can help us understand how the presence of the conductor might be a crucial factor whether these kind of groups flourish or not. On the surface, I made the 'right' interventions and said the 'appropriate' sentences (interpreting the outside threat and shifting the focus away from the defiant leader), however my interventions were more 'technical', and inside I felt tired and anxious, overwhelmed by unprocessed annihilation anxieties.

In a chapter that Raufman and I wrote for the upcoming book *Group Analysis in the Land of Milk and Honey* (Raufman and Weinberg edited by Robi Friedman and Yael Doron, in press) we discussed a similar situation, but with better results:

In a group composed of Israeli Jewish and Palestinian students using literature texts as a way to explore inner reality, someone chose to bring to the group one of Tagore's poems as a stimulus. The poem includes one line that describes transitional space: 'on the seashore of endless worlds, children play'. (Indeed this line was chosen by Winnicott as the motto for his article about transitional space). Unfortunately, the group took place in the summer of 2014, at the time of the disputed Israeli operation in Gaza. On the day the poem was introduced to the group, Palestinian children, playing on the seashore of Gaza, were killed inadvertently by Israeli bombing. In fact, the intrusion of the reality was

an attack on the metaphoric aspect of the poem. The playful quality was dismissed and the poem became a cynical and ironic description of the cruel reality, an enactment of anxieties related to situations of war and conflict, in which survival does not allow for playful experiences. The reaction to Tagore's poem strongly posed the basic dilemma as to whether the group can survive or not.

Again, we can ask whether the group can really survive under these attacks from outside and inside. Fortunately, this situation was managed well by the group conductor (Raufman) and the result was that in spite of the difficult situation and problematic times, the participants were determined not to miss any session and showed up to every meeting. They also kept bringing literary texts—a fact that was both ironic and essential.

Theoretical Musings and Possible Explanations

In order to understand how these impossible groups continue to function well, we first need to theorize and analyse which psychological mechanisms make them 'impossible'. Bion (1970, in Hinshelwood, 1994: 98) described three kinds of relationships between the container and the contained:

1. the contents are so vibrant and explosive that the whole container is exploded and disabled with uncontained result . . .
2. the container is so rigid that it does not allow of any real expression of the contents which are then simply moulded to the containing space . . .
3. both the container and the contents adapt and mould in response to one another, so that both are able to develop and 'grow'.

The above examples add another possibility in which the container is not strong or not solid enough to hold even non-explosive contents. In the demonstration and Internet groups, it is not the content that makes it difficult for the adaptation of the container, but it is the basic features of the leaking container. In the case of groups in times of war and terror, the picture is more complicated, as outside attacks lead to inner ones. Mechanisms of equivalence (Hopper, 2003) and projective identification weaken the container when attacks from the outside are enacted and replicated inside the group. Eventually, the boundary is unable to hold the group. When the boundaries of the safe space are breached, the existence and strength of the group container becomes extremely important. Bion's description of what he called 'attacks on linking' (1967), (destructive attacks on the linking between objects occurring in the psyche) might act in such groups to destroy the connections between emotions and logic, feelings and thinking, and to not allow for logical thinking, or thinking at all. Indeed, sometimes we can also identify aspects of an anti-group (Nitsun, 1991) contributing to these attacks on linking, on the container and on the group, as might have happened in the group after the terror attack in Paris. However, as said, in most of the above group examples it is not the act of the anti-group or explosive content that makes the group impossible. It is the fact that the setting of the group is inherently problematic, whether because the boundaries are loose, or because the attendance is unstable.

Perhaps now we can speculate what allows for these groups to thrive: Schlapobersky writes: 'The two elementary conditions for successful group therapy—on the one hand, membership and composition and on the other, the capabilities of the conductor—both have determining influences on the quality of a group's work (2016: 11). He also states ' . . . the conductor's primary job [is] —to equip people to "play" safely with human experience and do so across its wide range of emotions' (2016: 7). Perhaps the group conductor can provide something to compensate for boundary problems and leaking containers.

What we, as group analysts or group therapists, are trying to achieve, is creating a 'reflective space': 'the term "reflective space" indicates that aspect of the group in which members link emotionally and from which the personalities can emerge' (Hinshelwood, 1994: 96). No matter what the conditions of the group are, we help the group use the transitional space, the group matrix that is automatically created when people come together, in a way that will be beneficial for the members' growth. We support making this space a playground, in which the participants can free associate, connect emotionally, explore their inner thoughts and feelings, and reflect on the concrete events that occur in the group and in their lives in a way that goes beyond the concrete events themselves. We help them use symbols and metaphors and see life broadly.

My assumption is that one of the most important factors contributing to the success of the group is the *secure presence* (Neeman-kantor, 2013) of the group conductor. This secure presence can compensate

for fuzzy conditions, loose boundaries and leaking containers. The term secure presence reminds us of secure attachment from attachment theory, and indeed the secure presence of the conductor enhances secure attachment to the group. We know nowadays how much attachment plays a role in relationships, in therapy (Wallin, 2007) and in group therapy (Marmarosh, Markin, and Spiegel, 2013).

What is this secure presence (Neeman-kantor, 2013) and how is it created? This is still quite an enigma for me. The presence of the other is usually felt through hearing the other's voice and seeing the other's face and body. Foulkes, whose memory we honour through this annual lecture, was always described as having a warm or even radiating presence (Agazarian, 1989), but I have not found any detailed description of this presence or an explanation for the influence that he had on others. In my book about Internet groups (2014), I devoted an entire chapter to the question of presence and how it can be created even online. I showed that although traditionally, presence involves the body, this physical presence only supports subjective presence. The presence of the therapist involves his/her immersion, passion, attention, emotional involvement, reverie, and a readiness to be drawn into enactments (Grossmark, 2007). However, there is something beyond those features, and I believe it is how the group analyst holds the group in his/her mind. Our ability to hold the group-as-a-whole in our mind as a reflective space and stay hopeful despite the difficult conditions can compensate for unsafe conditions and contribute to the ability of the group to develop. In the example of the group I conducted

immediately after the terror attacks in Paris, I was too tired and anxious to keep the hope for the frightened participants and was too preoccupied with the real events to hold in mind the option of reflection and symbolization. At other times, the presence of a co-leader (as in the resident group example or the Israeli example) have proved essential in supporting the secure presence (Neeman-kantor, 2013) of the leadership.

However, the group therapist does not act in void, and it is no less important to look at the contribution of the group members for the success of the group. As we mentioned Bion's ideas about the container and the contained, we need to remember that the contained is not a passive actor in this relationship. Although the group members can sometime act in a destructive way (Nitsun's anti-group), frequently as a reaction to the lack of clear boundaries, they can also act in a way that overcomes the limitations of a leaking container, as we saw in the online group that searched for creative ways to bypass the virtual distance. The participants can do this by imagining the group as a good-enough holding environment despite its problematic 'real' qualities. Schlapobersky writes: 'mental processes always imply a real or imagined set of others, even when they look "as if" they belong to one person' (2016: 13). The function of the group depends not on the real properties of the setting, but more on the imagined ones: those that we keep in our mind. Powell (1991) argues that we can delineate the matrix as either inside us or outside us. The inside matrix is the embodied matrix and is susceptible to psychobiological investigation while the outside, unembodied, matrix encompasses the

nature of the transpersonal mind. This matrix is not based on the existence of physical boundaries or even human bodies and refers to a relational interface. Perhaps this is the 'invisible group' that Agazarian mentioned in the 12th Foulkes lecture (1989: 357): 'It is important to understand that this . . . has absolutely nothing to do with the real, visible people in the real, visible groups'.

The mere fact that we enter a therapy group implies certain conventional and social definitions of the situation (the setting) that goes beyond what the real situation provides. Thus, in an online group we can imagine ourselves as part of the virtual group, and rely on the illusion that we are still protected by our self-boundaries, meaning that we are able to choose whether to self-disclose, and feel protected enough despite the boundless cyberspace. In demonstration groups, the permeable membrane that exists between the demonstration and observation group during moments when projective identification is rife (meaning that the boundaries are almost non-existing both physically and psychologically), pushes the group to unconsciously create (in the group mind) an impermeable membrane around itself for protection.

It seems as if something happens in the mind of the group therapists and/or in the mind of the group members to create the illusion of safety. So far we examined separately the role of the conductor's presence and the role of the 'invisible group' in the mind of the participants to keep the group advancing and thriving. However, in the group analytic and the relational tradition, we cannot talk about one

element without including the other ('. . . including the conductor' as Foulkes wrote about group analysis), just as we cannot talk about the individual outside his/her social context. This idea is best encompassed by the field theory that takes into consideration all the dynamic forces acting in a certain psychological field. A short and exhaustive summary of this theory should include Kurt Lewin in social psychology (1951), Goldstein's 'total situation' in neurology (1940), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) in existentialism, and continue with the South American Baranger and Baranger (1969) who applied it to psychoanalysis. Lately these ideas were developed by Ferro (2007; 2011), who integrated Bion's ideas with the Barangers' field theory, explaining how in the analytic field, beta elements can be transformed and digested by the narratives constructed by the analytic pair, in our case the group conductor and group members. This process involves reverie, the transference—counter-transference matrix, emotional turbulences, transgenerational transmission, the dyad relationship; all the components that also participate in the group analytic field.

I will elaborate a little more on the field theory because it provides a good theoretical frame to the existence of the impossible groups. Tubert-Oklander (2007) summarized the dynamic properties of the analytic field according to Baranger and Baranger (1969). I will use some of his points (2007: 123), changing the words 'analytic field' to the 'group analytic field', and adding a few other words, in order to describe the dynamic properties

of the group analytic field and point out how they might further explain the possibility of impossible groups.

1. The [group] analytic situation is a multi-personal field in which all parties determine each other and whose experience and behaviour in this context cannot be fully understood without due reference to the other.
2. The [group] analytic situation is essentially ambiguous. This ambiguity is indispensable to create and maintain a special context in which any given event is amenable to various interpretations.
3. The multi-personal field of the [group] analytic situation is structured along three lines, derived from three basic configurations: (a) the structure derived from the *analytic contract*, which not only defines the spatial, temporal, and functional constants but also the indispensable asymmetry between the parties; (b) the structure of the *manifest material* (the [group] analytic dialogue); and (c) the *unconscious fantasy* that underlies all manifest expressions (the latent or unconscious content). This fantasy does not belong only to the group member; it is rather a co-creation by all parties in the group, a multi-fantasy.
4. Insight is also a field phenomenon, which may be defined as a restructuring of the field, a gradual development of all parties' understanding of their shared unconscious situation.

The above ideas can be applied to understanding how a safe enough environment is co-created in the mind of the group in collaboration with the fantasy of the secure presence of the conductor. This multi-unconscious-fantasy connects group members and conductor(s) and allows for insight and growth even when real circumstances seem to block any progress.

Although it might be beyond the scope of this article, this explanation touches a deep philosophical question of what is the mind.

Does the mind reside only *inside* the brain or is it also something that flows *between* people. The mind can be defined as a process that regulates the flow of energy and information. 'The mind emerges in the transaction of at least neurobiological and interpersonal processes. Energy and information can flow within one brain, or between brains (Siegel, 2006: 251).' Here is what Foulkes had to say about the mind:

> Personally I believe that the multipersonal hypothesis of mind is nearer the true nature of events . . . I found the old theory of perceiving this in terms of individuals and their interaction as individual minds enclosed in each skull, interacting in the most complicated fashion with the others that this theory acted as a great barrier to my understanding. (1973: 224)

In summary, impossible groups become possible, dynamic and alive, due to the secure presence of the group conductor, holding the reflective space in his/her mind, and the group members having a fantasized invisible group in their mind. Finally, in fact, it is the co-created fantasy in the mind of 'the group including the conductor', the multi-unconscious-fantasy that allows these group to thrive in leaking containers.

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