Chapter 4

The Edge of Chaos

Enactment, Disruption, and Emergence in Group Psychotherapy

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To jump into the unknown from what is known, but intolerable.

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Introduction

In this chapter I will introduce an approach to group therapy that is based on the idea that group psychotherapeutic process and change involves a constant movement into and through enactments that involve the group as a whole, the group analyst, and each group member. It is a truism in the group therapy field that a group is always interacting. This group interaction is the primary unique resource of group psychotherapy. It is out of this interaction that each group develops its particular group culture and the “group matrix” (Foulkes, 1975) from which change and growth emerge. As the group members engage with each other and bring in their whole personalities, enactments are unavoidable, and just like interaction, inevitable. In this chapter I will examine the process of these enactments from the perspective of current relational theorizing that emphasizes the presence of multiple self-states in the group and the embeddedness of the group analyst within the group enactments. These enactments are constantly unfolding and involve the group as a whole and the group analyst in repetitive and unmentalized states. Therapeutic action, in part, involves the ongoing work on the part of the group analyst and group members in attempting to understand what is going on in the group. This is achieved by accessing alternative self-states that allow the therapist or group members to think about and try to understand what is happening and thus turn unmentalized (Fonagy et al., 2002), “un-understandable” (Pines, 1998) and painful interaction into psychological learning and development. This process often involves the group and the group analyst entering into difficult and sometimes painful passages of group process together. With the therapist’s help in containing the painful and disowned affect, new experience and meaning can emerge for the group members from the unmentalized, unformulated, and rigid repetitive self-states that characterize the enactments.
The primary dynamic of change is conceptualized as a constant dialectical movement into and out of the "familiar chaos" (Stern, 1997) of the self-states engaged in the enactments and the more reflective and related self-states that enable working through. In order to describe this process and to outline the experience of the analyst’s embeddedness, I will look to dynamic systems theory that offers a conceptualization of change and emergence that seems to capture the experience of these enactments both systematically and metaphorically and is beautifully captured by Stuart Kauffmann’s notion that “life exists at the edge of chaos” (Kauffmann, 1995), to hermeneutic psychoanalysis that emphasizes the emergence of meaning from dialogic interaction and to relational psychoanalytic ideas of enactment, dissociation, and multiplicity.

The Work of the Group and Enactment
As the group therapist, my task is primarily to create and maintain the safe, productive, and transformational space within which the group can do its work. I set the boundaries of the group and help and encourage the group members to work together to create a dynamic group that is itself the agent of change. Rather than therapy in the group I am working toward a situation where there is therapy by the group (Foukes, 1975).

It is not uncommon for the group to engage in what feels like chaotic, painful, or numbing interactions with each other and with me. Most often these interactions are variations on the very damaging, deadening, and mystifying dynamics of the group members’ lives and minds. When these internalized modes of experiencing themselves and others unfold, it is often as familiar, repetitive patterns in relationships that are experienced as unthought “things that happen.” They leave the individuals with a dead and helpless feeling about themselves and the sense that this is “just the way things are.” At times there is tremendous pain and turbulence generated for the individual and the whole group by these ways of being. These interactions are versions of early trauma to the self that has taken place before there was sufficient language or cognitive ability to mentalize and thus construct a meaningful narrative, or later trauma that has been dissociated and has not been available for mental processing. This kind of damage to the mind and its relations to the world is not amenable to being talked about. It can only find expression via projective identification and enactment. My work is to help the group find what is meaningful and coherent in these chaotic interactions and to allow the emergence of what has until now been unformulated (Stern, 1997) and stuck in the realm of what cannot be thought and felt.

Rather than overcoming resistances or lifting repressions so that the unconscious can be made available, I see this work as the facilitating of a creative and emergent interactive group process wherein what was unformulated can take shape and find meaning. I help the group members work together such that the multiple and sometimes incompatible parts of themselves come to be enacted in the group. These enactments always involve the individual members themselves, the group as a whole, and the therapist. Everyone is involved.

Time and the Emergence of Meaning in Group Therapy
Group therapists almost universally talk about the focus on the “here-and-now” in group therapy (Ormont, 1992; Rutan & Stone, 2001; Yalom 1975). Patients are encouraged to talk about their experience in the here-and-now. Often focus on past events or on future hopes is questioned as an avoidance or flight from what is going on in the here-and-now (Ormont, 1992). My focus on the emergence of unformulated experience in group enactments takes a somewhat different view to the trajectory of time in group psychotherapy. The focus is on what is happening in the group and what will emerge. The distinctions between past, present, and future dissolve when the focus shifts to the finding of meaning in the what-is-about-to-emerge. Whether group members are talking about past experience or their feelings in the moment, is less relevant. The point is that either way, they and the other members are, or soon will be, doing something with each other that may itself contain the pieces of unformulated experience that need to be allowed to emerge and take shape within the group. Hans Loewald (1980) used the phrase “near future” to capture the curious transference enactments wherein the past is continually lived as an about-to-be future. It seems useful to think of the life of the group as taking place in the transformational space that is the “near future,” or as the French poet Yves Bonnefoy puts it, “the ever next” (Bonnefoy, 1982).

The work of finding meaning rather than repetitive deadness is itself a reparative and restorative endeavor. The British group analyst Malcolm Pines (1998) has eloquently described how the group evokes the primary mother–infant emotional environment and can become a space and an object in and of itself that contains the qualities of mirroring, relatedness, and reparation. Group members respond to and internalize these qualities over time. My hope is that they not only find situations that promote the making of meaning out of their empty and unthought experience, but will also internalize and develop for themselves the reflective function and the ability to mentalize that emerge within the group (Fonagy et al., 2002). These capacities are initially embodied in my being, presence, and attitude in the group.

The Hermeneutic Circle and Unformulated Experience in Group
From a hermeneutic and constructivist approach to group psychoanalysis the unconscious is not regarded as a storehouse of complete and inert memories, objects, and experiences waiting to be unearthed and brought to consciousness via interpretation (Hoffinan, 1998; Orange, 1995; Stern, 1997). Rather, the meaning of behavior emerges through the group interactions and dialogue. The hermeneutic contribution to psychoanalytic process builds on Gadamer’s
conception of the hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1975, 1976). Meaning is conceived as “an activity, an event” that “can only take place in interaction” (Stern, 1997, p. 212). Although originally applied to textual analysis, the relevance of group interaction is compelling. Meaning emerges as we test our assumed understanding in dialogue with an other. Our understanding shifts as our conceptions have to be adjusted to account for what we do not yet understand or only partially understand. One way to think about the interaction of group psychoanalysis is a version of the hermeneutic circle wherein the members are trying to be understood and are trying to understand the others in the group. Gadamer (1976) has emphasized that the act of trying to understand a text or an other is transformative in itself. There is an ongoing process of adjusting and re-adjusting perceptions and assumptions in order for a shared meaning to emerge.

This transformation of the self and creation of meaning is the very process that has broken down for the patients who come to group. Rather than being open to alternative perspectives about their own ways of being and an openness to know the other group members fully, we find that they are locked in a repetitive “familiar chaos.” This is a phrase that Donnel Stern (1997) borrowed from Paul Valery. He describes a “state of mind cultivated and perpetuated in the service of the conservative intention to observe, think and feel only in the well-worn channels—in the service, actually of the wish not to think” (p. 51). Such a state of mind feels familiar and therefore a comfort, and yet is chaotic in that experience and thoughts are yet to be developed or formulated. It is a state of mind that is dissociated in that there is a failure to construct or make sense of what is happening. Things just happen. Such a conceptualization is not far from Bion’s concept of “K” or “anti-thought” (Bion, 1962). The as yet unformulated experience is not accessed through interpretation, because there is nothing there yet to interpret. The unformulated experience can only be known if allowed to emerge in the group process, and to take shape and meaning in that emergence.

In group psychotherapy there is a constant dialectical movement between enactments of the familiar chaos of the patients’ lives and the search to find the meaning in these enactments. (In truth, the word “multilectic” would be more appropriate, given that “dialectic” implies a dialectic pattern between two poles— as in Hegel’s thesis and anti-thesis—while in the group therapy situation we are looking at a situation where the multiple self-states of the group and its members intertwine in a multitude of enactments and reflective states at any given time). The leader is often involved unconsciously in the enactments along with the other group members, either in a dyadic manner or in terms of a group-as-a-whole enactment. The task of the leader and the group is to try to notice when these enactments are occurring—in everyday speech, “to figure out what’s going on”—to describe the experience and then to try to make sense of it. The exercise of making and finding meaning in the enactments gives shape to what is unformulated as it is emerging and is transformative in itself.

Complexity and Multiple Self-States in Group

This constant movement between the rigidity of dissociated repetitiveness and the freedom to think new thoughts and find meaning finds resonance in the application of complexity theory, or dynamic systems theory to psychoanalysis (Galatzer-Levy, 2004; Ghent, 2002; Harris, 2005; Palombo, 1999) and group therapy (Rubenfeld, 2001). Outlined in an ever-expanding literature (Gleck, 1987; Lewin, 1999; Waldrop, 1992), complexity theory offers a way of thinking about the clinical experience of group and individual psychoanalysis that goes beyond linear and binary explanations (Harris, 2005). The group may be viewed as a self-organizing eco-system that is subject to the processes of all biological systems, and like all biological systems any perturbation to the system will cause changes to the whole system. A group like any open system will settle into attractor states that offer relative stability. These attractor states can be shallow and therefore vulnerable to complete reconfiguration in response to perturbations or can be deep and far more resistant to disruption.

Rubenfeld (2001) points out that unlike earlier notions of General Systems Theory (Agazarian, 1989; Durkin, 1981; von Bertalanfly, 1966) that conceptualized a group, like all living systems as drawn toward equilibrium and homeostasis, complex systems—and a psychotherapy group is a superb living example—must maintain disequilibrium and instability in order to adapt to changes in the internal and external environment. Rather than seeing a group as always engaged in maintaining homeostasis, this view sees groups as always engaged in adapting to new and changing circumstances. In particular, perturbations to an open system cause destabilization and turbulence that then open up the opportunity for change.

In the group therapy situation, there are manifest perturbations to the system, such as the arrivals and departures of members, vacations, and the like. (There are also constantly more subtle and perhaps smaller perturbations such as the shifts in self-states within the group members from one moment to the next. ) As the vignette to be described below illustrates, such events can cause terrific personal and group turbulence, and powerful opportunities for change and growth. It is in the most turbulent times that vulnerable group members are more prone to rely on the more rigid and known patterns of their own “familiar chaos” as a first-order adaptation. Familiar and protective self-states are called upon to manage the terrors of change. It is out of these self-states that enactments are born, as the whole group and the therapist may get pulled into a dissociated self-state that does not allow access to other more adaptable and flexible self-states that would allow for the formulation of the experience. As we will see below, a self-state that allows thought and mentalization can be a rare and precious commodity at a time of such turbulence.

Stuart Kauffman’s (1995) concept that “life exists at the edge of chaos” highlights the ongoing tension in all living systems between rigidity and sameness on the one hand and disruptions, chaos and change on the other. This is what happens in group psychotherapy when there are perturbations to the system and
when the old familiar ways of coping that involve the dissociation of more flexible self-states operate. From this perspective enactments involve cleaving to a familiar and worn pathway of being and not formulating experience (i.e., dissociating), in the face of turbulence.

Both complexity theory and contemporary relational psychoanalysis offer us ways to focus on the fine-grained moments when there are shifts from one state to another, from dissociation and enactment to reflection and the creation of meaning. In the field of complexity and mathematics, there has been a shift from the prior held truth that there are three classes of behavior—fixed point, periodic, and chaotic—to the addition of a fourth class—an intermediate class between fixed and chaotic (Lewin, 1999). Lewin (1999) describes how these ideas were adapted to the world of cell life and then to ecosytems by Kauffman (1995) and others. It appears that all biological life is sweetly poised at the “edge of chaos” where “chaos and stability pull in opposite directions” (Lewin, 1999, p. 51). What is so compelling to psychoanalysts and group analysts is the idea that it is the intermediate area between order and chaos that offers maximal information processing, change, and creativity (Lewin, 1999, p. 51). This area is termed the “edge of chaos.”

In systemic terms, the group and the individual members involved in trying to find their way through an enactment are poised in that fourth zone between the fixed and chaotic—within and between dissociation and the formulation of experience—and it is here that there is tremendous opportunity for powerful emotional experience and change. Such a moment can also be conceptualized as the “phase transition” (Lewin, 1999, p. 20) where the disruption has been sufficient to shift the system out of one attractor state and the system has yet to settle into the next one.

The phrase “the edge of chaos” also speaks eloquently to the phenomenology of these situations. As the vignette described below hopefully conveys, for the group members and the therapist there is an exquisite alchemy of pain, disruption, and new insight and experience when an enactment is allowed to emerge and is worked through.

From within the field of relational psychoanalysis, Philip Bromberg’s (1998) image of “standing in the spaces” within and between different self-states also speaks to the phenomena of enactments in group psychotherapy. I suggest that this resonates with the above idea of the fourth zone of experience that is between the fixed and the chaotic. The very task of interacting with each other and living out the group interactions whilst simultaneously engaging with the task of figuring out what’s going on asks the group therapist and the group members to inhabit at least two self-states at once, and the space between them: one that permits an immersion in the experience of the moment with the other members and the other that seeks to mentalize, to find the meaning and shape of that experience. In other words of Bromberg, how do we “stay the same while changing?” Bromberg has given us many compelling clinical examples that highlight the immense value of careful attention to the shifts in self-states in the patient and in himself in individual work (Bromberg, 1998, 2006). Similarly, the work of group therapy is conducted right “at the edge of chaos,” that is, when there are shifts in the self-states of the group-as-a-whole, the members, and the group analyst.

The Group Analyst and Enactment

Often when the group-as-a-whole is engaged in a blind and total way, the group analyst is unable to maintain his or her analyzing function and stay in the self-state that will offer insight or at least some connection to the task of the group to try to understand their experience. Unlike other approaches to group-as-a-whole phenomena and to group therapy, a relational approach does not assume that the group analyst can stay outside of the enactment with the clarity that enables accurate and meaningful interpretations of the group process. Indeed the idea that the group therapist is immune to group-as-a-whole processes and can maintain clarity of consciousness while the group members are swept away in the unconscious group process is seen from a relational perspective as both undesirable and actually impossible. Steven Mitchell (1993, 1997) has persuasively reconsidered the analyst’s authority and knowledge as entirely mediated by the analyst’s own experience and subjectivity. It is only by becoming lost in the total experience of the group, or as Donnel Stern (1997) puts it, the “grip of the field,” even if that involves a temporary destruction of thought processes (Hinselwood, 1994; Gordon, 1994), that one can find and create meaning in the enactment. In situations such as this, the analyst has to work hard to help the group stay in touch with the task and to try to find one or some parts of some of the members who can begin the process of mentalizing and reflective function that will guide the group out of their temporary darkness. Experiences such as these are drenched in pain and struggle for the group members and the group analyst, but are the sine qua non of a group therapy experience that will be real and vital and will actually bring about change.

In order for this kind of process to emerge, to be “lived out,” as Betty Joseph (1985) would say, the group therapist must be able to contain and hold the group while the enactment unfolds. Premature interpretation, the rush to know something before it has come to be, in the group—or in Betty Joseph’s words, to turn the experience into analytic “material”—can impinge and constrict the group’s potential to live through and find their own meaning and grounding in the experience that unfolds. The hermeneutic approach values the idea that there is no one correct meaning to the group’s behavior, and I would always value the meaning that the group comes to from within their own struggle together, over any interpretation I might be able to offer.

An Enactment of Disruption and Emergence in a Group Session

As by now will be clear, my approach to group psychotherapy embraces the idea of disruption and turbulence. Far from being a problem to be overcome, disruptions
It is in the group's culture to make all announcements at the beginning of the group. Accordingly, I announce that there will be a new member coming to the group soon. There is a swirl of energy in the room, mostly centering around curiosity as to whether the new person will be a man or a woman. Karen (the most recent member) is upset and says, "Oh no! I was just beginning to open up. I hope it's not someone with an eating disorder. Those eating disorder groups are so competitive and insane. I'm thinking of doing DBT. But I don't have to do it on Wednesday night (group night)."

By way of background, Karen is in her mid-thirties and has had years of treatment after a massively traumatic childhood. She has struggled for years with all the disorders of trauma and neglect: difficulties in self-regulation, self-injury, eating disorder and on two occasions was hospitalized when suicidal. Kareen had indeed only recently begun to open up and talk more intimately about herself in the group. When she is anxious, her speech and thought are disjointed and muddled as they are here. My thought is that her disjointed fragmental state is capturing the whole group's state of mind in response to the news of the new member.

Gladys speaks up and says that she's thinking of leaving the group. Dorothy says that a new member makes her think of how long she has been in the group (she is one of the founder members) and that she still finds the group useful. She still learns a lot. Victor chimes in. "Me too." Victor and Henry review their respective progress in the group, and talk for a few minutes in a disconnected way. Both Victor and Henry are prone to this kind of reverie in the group and can talk in a dissociated way when there is anxiety and turbulence brewing in the room, as if it were happening to others.

Both come from families where anger and fear can suddenly erupt in parents or siblings with frightening intensity. While they are talking, Gladys's face darkens. I am aware of this and anxiety wells up within me. I am aware of charging my batteries; this is going to be a long night. I ask the group, "What's going on?" Karen asks, "Are you OK?"

Gladys turns to me slowly and malevolently. "I hate you. I was just getting over hating you for moving. I was going to leave the group but then you moved and I couldn't leave because it would seem like I was leaving because of that and I'm busy with school and now this! Now I can't leave because it'll seem like it's because of the new person, not because of my own reasons. I'm just going to leave. I want to go off my meds. I'm sick of it. Isn't that meant to be how it goes; you get better and cut down, but Dr. B says they are helping so why change. But I'm just going to leave."

I scan the room. Heads are down. The mood is grim.

I address the group. "How are people feeling toward Gladys?"

Victor leans toward her. "I feel supportive. I know what you're going through. You don't have to feel that way."

Henry picks up the thread, once again joining with Victor in the attempt to soothe the rage and fear in the room. He responds to Gladys's comments about her medications and launches into a long disconnected story, all too familiar to the group, about his trials and tribulations with his thyroid medication. It should be mentioned that Henry is an intellectually brilliant man, the son of scientists who seem to relate to people as if they were robots, with little sense of human functioning. He often feels other than human and can only relate in this very split-off, affectless manner. Since being in the group, he has begun to be and to feel more a member of the human race.

I encourage the group to find out what Henry feels at this moment, but it's not so easy to shift Henry from his groove. After a few failed attempts, I ask the group what is Henry feeling toward Gladys that he doesn't know. There is unison. He doesn't want her to leave, they cry. Henry looks pleased. "Yes." He says. "Please don't leave." There is a small ripple of pleasure in the room.
Henry has found a feeling. However, Gladys is still drenched in darkness and everyone knows it.

Gladys ignores the group and Henry. She focuses on me again. “I hate you. I was just getting comfortable with you again. I had been so angry and was just feeling OK with you, and now you’re doing this again!” She continues for a time in dark hatred. I ask her to say, if she can, what is it that I am doing to her.

“You’re just taking it away from me. I can’t leave now. I hate you.”

I try to reflect, “I’ve trapped you,” but she is not yet in a state that will permit ingress.

She continues. “I know what it is. You need more money. I know it, once you moved in here. The new office; you’ll need new furniture. You gave us a chance to settle in and now this!”

“I try again to reach her. “You feel annulled. If I move, I’m annihilating you, if I raise fees, I’m annihilating you. Like you said when we moved, I’m just dragging you around.”

She has heard me, especially the reference to being dragged around. Her words, spoken when the group moved, that resonated with her feeling as a child, but she is still trapped in her familiar chaos. She has responded to the disruptive news of the new patient with a fall back into the repetitive rigid familiar chaos of traumatic neglect and annulment.

She continues: “I can’t go on. I just can’t do this. I need to leave, I’m not coming back. I’m going back to school in the evenings in September so I’ll have to leave anyway. It’s just too much. Up to now, everything’s been done has been arranged around the group and my therapy schedule. I’ve organized my vacations around group and my individual sessions. Now I do this!”

The atmosphere in the room is vile, ugly, and hopeless. I am not doing too much better. I can feel the dark pull of Gladys’s self-state. I see the rest of the group sucked into her darkness. I am distraught. We have been into and through these passages before with Gladys and it is always slow and painful. It can take weeks until the group comes out the other side. I am deeply upset, and experience a collapse within me into a complementary self-state. I become certain that I have made a grievous error inviting a new member in at this time. I am quickly on the slippery slope of self-denigration. It is all falling apart. How could I have made such an error? How can I possibly think I can run groups, let alone think of writing about and teaching group therapy? I convince myself that there is no alternative but to cancel the new group member. I think of all the repercussions of this; the conversation I will have to have with the patient and the referring clinician and so on. I am now locked in the enactment with Gladys and the group. I feel that I am a terrible persecutory and neglectful object who has no business running groups. In retrospect, in Heinrich Racke’s terminology (1968), I imagine that this was a complementary version of Gladys’s mother’s unmentalized dread that she was not up to the task of having and raising children. Similarly, in a concordant way the group and myself are experiencing the unmentalized, dissociated piece of Gladys’s upbringing. We are feeling bullied and tortured by her pain and rage, as she was by her mother. It is a victimized response that leads to an internal collapse that involves self-denigration, helplessness, and disgust.

In the moment of the group, I am, as Donnel Stern would say, “in the grip of the field.” I cannot see or feel alternatives at that moment. The group is in the same grip. In such situations I use the multiplicity of the group. I look to see if there is anyone in the group who can access a different self-state that can offer a way out of this grip, and open the path to thinking.

So I ask the group what people are sitting with. Henry says that he’s thinking that we shouldn’t forget that the group could be of great benefit to the new member too. There is the slightest perceptible shift in the feeling in the room. Henry, perhaps due to his affective disconnection or to his response to the previous moment where the group and I helped him express a deep and simple feeling toward Gladys, is not entirely stuck in the group self-state of horror and helplessness with and in response to Gladys. He is a little more able to stand in a space that allows him a perspective, and allows him to think an empathic thought about the needs of the new member. He is able to feel that the new member is herself a subject, not just an object. In this moment, he is free of the enactment in a way that neither the group nor I can be. Such openings of thought and intersubjectivity in the midst of an enactment are enormously helpful. I am able then to function in a somewhat freer way myself. I notice that Dorothy is looking particularly pained and I become sure that she is responding to Gladys. I ask her what she is feeling toward Gladys.

Dorothy says: “To be honest, and I hate saying this, but Gladys, the first part of what you said made me angry. And I hate saying this because I know that you are in a bad place. But I couldn’t help but feel ‘oh no, here we go again; now this bad place that Gladys is going into is going to fill up the whole group’ and I really can’t stand it when you say that you are going to leave. It hurts me so much. In fact, what I feel and I hate saying this, is that I think I feel what you say you feel when your sister does what she does to you. It’s like it completely takes over and there’s no room for anyone else. Then we all have to go along with it and we can’t challenge you or even help you.”

This is a major shift in the self-state of the group and for Dorothy personally. Dorothy has spent her life being cowed into submission by an officious
Dorothy responds: “But it’s no one’s fault. That’s not what I’m talking about. Not blame. I’m just saying that I felt angry. I didn’t want to, but I just felt I needed to express it. No one is being blamed.”

I amplify Dorothy’s point, sensing that Gladys is now shifting to a self-state of openness and thought. I tell her that this seems to be just how it goes in her family. There is no room for vulnerability and need. It’s always about someone being blamed.

Gladys cries. She shakes with anger. “I’m so fucking angry with my sister. You won’t believe what’s going on. She’s pregnant again!”

This has the quality of a bombshell. The group has worked hard over the last year to help Gladys cope with the overwhelming disruption, envy, and isolation she has experienced following her sister’s first pregnancy and the birth of her first child.

The group is gripped by this news and the self-state of the group is now utterly vibrant and engaged. Gladys tells a story of family dysfunction. Her sister isn’t speaking to her parents and is angry with her. Everyone engages in the conversation that feels full of vitality, empathy, and sharing.

The Group Finds Its Way Out of the Enactment

How did this group release itself from the grip of this painful enactment? Or, in the terms of dynamic systems theory, what facilitated the phase transition out of the attractor state of the enactment? First, Henry introduced the subjectivity of the new member. Then Dorothy tried to express her emotional reaction to Gladys’s assault and persevered in her attempt to have her own subjectivity acknowledged. When Dorothy implored Gladys to understand that she was really hurt by her and that no one is to blame, she was implicitly calling to the other potential self-states that Gladys can occupy. She was reaching out to the part of Gladys that can empathize with Dorothy and that can have what Fonagy and his colleagues would call, “reflective function.” Finally Karen too was able to step back and in an empathic manner tell Gladys that she was not going anywhere. In that moment Karen and Gladys were standing in a new dialectical space. Karen was saying, in effect: “You are in this awful place and I have been pulled into it with you, but you and I know there are other parts of you, other self-states which still exist even if you cannot reclaim them right now.” All of these interactions are the building blocks of emotional meaning and mentalization that allow the group to make a new intersubjective and related experience out of an old repetitive enactment of familiar chaos and dissociation.
Group Leadership, Containment, and Complexity

It is primarily by creating the space within which the group could live through this enactment that meaning and the potential for change emerged. There were many opportunities to intervene with interpretations about what was going on. From the get-go when Karen talked in her fragmented way, I could have commented that this was a reaction to the news of the new member. Certainly later many interpretations were possible when Gladys began her assault. Such attempts to turn these moments into group “material,” I believe, would foreclose the enactment and deprive the group of the experience of living through these experiences together and to finding their own meaning and mutual help within the experience. The rush to interpret or give premature closure to such moments is often driven by the analyst’s anxiety and can be understood as the analyst’s need to dissociate (Reis, 2006). It is hard and disturbing for the analyst to be pulled into such dark places. My work is not to do the group’s work for them: to know what is going on before they do. My work is to maintain the frame and contain the intolerable affect and thereby help them to do this work together. This involves allowing my immersion in Gladys’s assault, to allow it ingress, to become temporarily stuck in the self-state of self-denigration and collapse, and to be available with the other group members when an alternative self-state is evoked that will allow us to stand in a space both within the enactment and outside of it.

The group then is in the presence not only of an object that maintains the frame and is durable in the face of disruption and attack, but also of an object that is affected and moved, along with the group. Alvarez (1992) talks about an “animate object” that facilitates the growth of a human mind by joining with and responding to the needs of the child. She elaborates on Winnicott’s (1971) idea of the use of an object that emphasizes the object’s survival of the infant’s attacks. She paints a picture of an object that facilitates the process of reparation following the envious and hateful attacks of the infant or patient. For Alvarez, the process of reparation is crucial to the development of the child’s mind and central to the process of containment. What seems to relate most pertinently to my role in the group is the focus Alvarez places on the changes that the object of reparation undergoes: “A repaired object ... is fundamentally different from an undamaged one” (1992, p. 142). In the group, I believe that one part of me, one self-state, is available to be temporarily damaged and then restored, to be disturbed and then to recover, and to be changed in the process. This facility is the animate and alive version of containment that promotes reparation and the growth of mentalization. Similarly, Bollas (1987) suggests that the analyst must become disturbed by the patient when there is powerful disturbance and distress present.

This is a different conception of the role of the group leader. Such a group leader is effective by being engaged, moved, and changed along with the group. This leader operates within the group and yet is always maintaining the safety and boundary of the experience. This is a conception of leadership that seeks to integrate the idea of complexity in systems and is guided by the position of the relational analyst: mutually yet asymmetrically engaged in the process of emergence and change (Aron, 1996).

In terms of dynamic systems theory, the leader is no more able to stay out of the attractor state—the enactment—than the group. The influence that will perturb the system sufficiently to enable the transition out of the attractor state is most potent when coming from within the group itself, as when this group finds its way to alternate and mentalizing self-states. The leader’s role then can be conceptualized as the managing of the phase transition or the period of disequilibrium and instability, and allow for this to emerge from its own process. The leader’s role is to live with the group, at the edge of chaos.

Implications for Technique and the Group Analyst’s Subjectivity

In terms of group analytic technique, there are a number of considerations that my approach suggests. In order for this work to be possible, it is of primary importance that the frame and boundaries of the group analytic situation be maintained as firmly as possible. Without the experience of a firm, yet responsive frame around the group, the patients cannot enter into the kind of emotional territory and exploration described above. Further, without confidence in the frame and the group members’ adherence to all the group agreements (Rutan & Stone, 2001), such as not socializing outside of the group and maintaining confidentiality, the group analyst cannot feel comfortable allowing the development of such enactments and will not be able to tolerate the emotional strain for him or herself.

The maintenance of the frame also involves an appreciation of the group analyst’s role as leader of the group and the powerful group dynamics and transferences that leadership evokes (Bion, 1961; Turquet, 1974; Klein et al., 1992). The relational approach has, however, introduced a critical reconsideration of the role of the analyst and the analyst’s neutrality (Aron, 1996; Hoffman, 1998; Mitchell, 1993, 1997). As mentioned above, it is no longer considered helpful or even possible for the group analyst to be perched above the dynamics of the group in such a way that objective interpretations of the group process are possible. Such a position asks that we also reconsider the role of disclosure of the group analyst’s subjectivity during the group and in particular during enactments such as the one described here.

My guiding principle is to always act according to what will maintain the safety of the group environment such that enactments can unfold as deeply and revealingly as possible. Accordingly, it is important that the group analyst be both comfortable and mindful when bringing his or her own subjectivity into the group. I do so when the heat of the group is milder, which is to say, when there are multiple self-states available in the group such that, first, I can find my own subjectivity (not a given during powerful enactments) and, second, that my subjectivity can be comprehended by the group members. For instance, on another occasion, Karen experienced Victor as bullying her. The group members
were in agreement with Karen and talked about their feelings about Victor. I had not experienced Victor in this way and introduced this to the group for consideration. When I introduce my subjectivity in this way, it is in the spirit of inquiry and curiosity, that my perception at this time is one of many possibilities. This, I feel is important in that it not only values the members’ many points of view, but also models the open search for meaning and self-reflection that I hope will become a part of the group culture. On this occasion I was also mindful that Victor can fall into the role of scapegoat, and that Karen can find injuries where there is the smallest slight. In this instance the atmosphere in the group was one of curiosity and exploration, and my introducing of my subjectivity was stirred into the mix of the discussion in, what seemed to be, a healthy manner and furthered the spirit of inquiry (Lichtenberg et al., 2002) and reflection prevalent at the time.

When the group enters the territory of powerful enactments where self-states become rigid and dissociation predominates as described in this chapter, I am much more focused on maintaining the safety of the enterprise. In a situation such as this, I suspect that revelation and discussion of my sense of fragmentation and despair would have created more terror and trauma in the group members and would have therefore closed down the unfolding of the enactment, rather than allowing it to continue. In situations such as this, the containment of the experience seems to be of the utmost importance. To have injected my own experience at this particular juncture would, I believe, have been an evacuation of the difficult emotions I felt I was being asked to contain. My evaluation was that there was little reflective function available in the group at this point and that all I could do was to hold on to the experience and neither preclude nor evacuate it. It is my ability to hold on under duress, to search for my own reflective self-states, that will be internalized by the group members over time.

In Conclusion

I have illustrated an approach to the theory and practice of group psychoanalysis that utilizes the relational concepts of multiple self-states, the centrality of enactments, and the emergence of meaning and mentalization within them. A theory of healing in group psychoanalysis emerges that emphasizes the analyst’s containment of enactments and the value of turbulence in group process. The dynamic systems theory concept that change and growth occur in the moments between order and chaos is applied to the group process, particularly to the moments where the group members stand in the spaces within and between alternative self-states while searching for a way through an enactment.

In the vignette, the group members were not only helpful to Gladys, but as I hope is clear, were also becoming less reliant on dissociation themselves, while growing their own abilities for reflective functioning, mentalization, containment, and intersubjective relatedness.

References

Chapter 5

Repairing the Irreparable

The Flow of Enactive Engagement in Group Psychotherapy

Robert Grossmark

Introduction

This chapter will advance the view that dynamic change in group psychotherapy is effected by an enactive form of free association which I term the "flow of enactive engagement" (Grossmark, 2012b). I will build on ideas expressed long ago by Foulkes (1948) and Durkin (1964) that placed group free association at the center of the therapeutic action of group analysis and group therapy. I will then outline the phenomena of trauma, dissociation, and enactment that have been central to the relational conception of psychopathology and therapeutic action drawing in particular on the work of Philip Bromberg (1998, 2006) and D.B. Stern (1997, 2010). I will suggest that the engine of a contemporary group psychotherapy is the group's flow into and out of group enactments of traumatic phenomena and states. This flow can be allowed to move along unimpeded by an engaged and involved yet unobtrusive group analyst just as a more classical analyst might have listened to the flow of a patient's free associations. In the model I will describe the associations as things that happen in the group rather than the verbal associations of the members, and the group analyst is embedded in the process rather than abstinent or neutral as in the original Freudian conception. From this flow of enactments emerges the narrative of the unconscious and dissociated life of the group members and the group as a whole. These enactments can often involve the group in painful, disruptive, and distressing affect and experience for group members and group therapist alike (Grossmark, Chapter 4 this volume), and I will offer clinical examples that illustrates the work of group therapy from this perspective.

Group Free Association

Writing at the inception of the practice of group psychotherapy, Foulkes utilized and embellished upon Freud's concept of free association. Freud, you will recall, asked his patients to say whatever came into their minds, to avoid censoring any thoughts according to what they might deem irrelevant or unpleasant. He told his patients to: