Relational Experiences in Large Group

A Therapeutic and Training Challenge

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The central dynamic struggle throughout life is between the powerful need to establish, maintain and protect intimate bonds with others and various efforts to escape the pains and dangers of these bonds—the sense of vulnerability, the threat of disappointment, engulfment, exploitation and loss.

(Mitchell, 1988)

What I have in mind here is the psychoanalytic study of (more or less large) groups: their formation, cohesion, fragmentation; or, stated in more specific terms, the circumstances that favor their formation, the nature of the psychological cement that holds them together, the psychological conditions under which they begin to manifest regressive behavior and begin to crumble, etc.

(Kohut, 1978)

Introduction

Large groups can be, and often are, difficult to comprehend. Moving beyond the small group of seven to ten members to groups composed of thirty or more members can provide unique learning experiences both about the individuals in the group and about the large group process itself. The Mitchell quote captures our ongoing struggle to maintain connection with others. The dyad, our earliest experience, prepares us for larger groups such as the family. School may introduce us to yet larger group settings. Nothing, however, can fully prepare for large group experiences. Le Bon (Kreeger, 1975, p. 23) defined the larger group as potentially a mob in which individuality blurs and more primitive aspects of the self emerge, characterized by a lack of ethical consciousness. Large groups have long fascinated us, primarily for the danger that may ensue as a result of unleashed primitive forces. Thus, the study of large group within psychotherapy and psychoanalysis has a long history. It is a model often employed to train mental health professionals and others about group dynamics. In the United States, the most prominent study takes place under the auspices of the A.K. Rice Institute, which has promoted the large group for many decades. Study of large group behavior, however, also occurs in many other venues as discussed in several books (Kreeger, 1975; Schneider & Weinberg, 2003).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the large group through the theoretical perspectives offered under the umbrella of self-psychology as well as other relational theories (Harwood, 1995; Segalla, 2001; Grossmark, 2007). Much of what has been written about large groups has been done from Freudian and Kleinian perspectives. While this has proven useful in understanding some of the regressive and aggressive behavior of large groups, it has not offered enough about the more health-seeking behavior also present in the large group as it is in each individual (Kohut, 1984). What has been substantially absent in this literature is an exploration of the positive ways in which the large group overcomes barriers to connection and engagement. This was explored in my 1996 paper but was not the primary goal of that paper. My current interest is in understanding the presence of more positive forces within the large group as well as recognizing that our primary emphasis on the individual has caused us to overlook our inevitable embeddedness in systems. Fosshage (2011), exploring contributions of systems theory, states:

A nonlinear dynamic system refers to independent and interdependent elements that over time mutually influence and transform each other in a relatively unpredictable fashion. An inherent property of any system ... is that it becomes self-organizing; that is, it establishes patterns that in turn, become more predictable features of the system. This property to self-organize is inherent in each individual and between them. (p. 98)

This description aptly captures what happens in the large group. One of the many struggles faced by large group members is to maintain a sense of self while also experiencing some sense of a potential loss of self. That can be very daunting. This may be reflective of our intense emphasis on the individual, often loosing contact with our inevitable embeddedness with others from birth. This challenge to individuality and its implications are being explored by Orange (2011b) and others. She has suggested we consider that by primarily focusing on the individual and ignoring larger contexts, we inevitably promote individuality without adequate consideration of the other. This focus on individuality, a very American concept, does not foster mutuality nor does it address what may be a more ethical stance, that of putting the “other” first (Orange, 2011a). Frie puts this very well:

In contrast to the individualism inherent in the Hobbesian and Freudian world of self-preservation, a dialogical stance is grounded in our social nature. However, neither can this stance overlook the capacity for aggression and domination. As Nussbaum (2007) wrote, ‘We all have tendencies that can lead to narcissism and the domination of others, and we all have tendencies that can lead to compassion and acceptance of other’s reality’ (p. 335). It is
the ambiguity of experience, the potential to be violent toward or accepting of the Other, that is at the heart of the issue.

Recognizing our capacity for both love and aggression as seen in both individual and group work has been a topic that has engaged me for the decades I have served as a leader on a large group team and observed many efforts by large group members to reach across barriers, attempting to connect with others in the group. These positive efforts can lead to experiences of transcendence in which group members reach a profound level of compassionate engagement with others in the large group. Moving away from a focus on projections is not to ignore that these are plentiful but to emphasize that the human desire to be part of the tribe (Wilson, 2012) requires positive efforts and that these efforts exist along side more negative projective forces. My emphasis on these more positive efforts at connection is also a reflection of a shift in psychoanalysis, from a hermeneutics of suspicion to a hermeneutics of trust (Orange, 2011a). Orange states her view succinctly: “Freud’s hermeneutics, his theory of meaning, assumes that consciousness always disguises and negates truth. He therefore had to approach the patient via a tangled theory of underlying and hidden motives” (Orange, 2011b, p. 27). Her offer of a hermeneutics of trust opens new areas of exploration for therapists. She states:

This kind of hermeneutics rests on the assumption that we share with the other, for better and for worse, a common inherited world (Dostel, 1987) within which we attempt to understand ... it is a kind of faithfulness to the other and to the therapeutic task.

Her perspective is considerably different from what Wachtel (2008) describes of that Freudian position: “The mainstream of American psychoanalytic thought emphasized neutrality, anonymity, caution about ‘gratifying’ the patient’s infantile needs and the primacy of insight” (p. 5). Shifting our study of the large group using both self and relational theories, guided by a hermeneutics of trust, opens new possibilities for those endeavoring to study behavior in this setting, bringing to this study a vision reflective of the cultural drift within psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.

Self and Relational Theories in Large Group Behavior: Shifting Emphasis, Shifting Theory

Understanding our inevitable embeddedness in systems that go far beyond the family group to larger groups in the culture is an essential part of the training of therapists, especially those who aspire to becoming group therapists. In recent years, the evolution of psychoanalytic theory has progressed to a deeper understanding of the co-creation of all human behavior (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002; Beebe & Lachmann, 2002; Benjamin, 1998). This brings with it fresh perspectives both about complex systems in which we all exist and the implications for understanding our impacts on the system as well as the intricacies of intimate connections and our inevitable need for the other in developing our own subjectivity. Benjamin (1998) states:

The confrontation with the other’s subjectivity and the limits of self-assertion is a difficult one to negotiate. The need for recognition entails this fundamental paradox: in the very moment of realizing our own independent will, we are dependent upon another to recognize it. At the very moment we come to understanding the meaning of I, myself, we are forced to see the limitations of that self. At the very moment when we understand that separate minds can share similar feelings, we begin to find out that these minds can also disagree.

This beautifully captures how the dilemma of mutual recognition, the experience of two subjects, is often a hard one to comprehend. What then happens to this process of recognition as we enter large group experience? How do we hold on to ourselves while also retaining the capacity to engage empathically with the other, trying to experience their subjectivity? What happens when we lose the face-to-face of the dyad or small group? In the absence of seeing the other face-to-face is there an anonymity that allows a regressive pull toward individual omnipotence, disallowing recognition of the other? Does this foster a regressive pull toward undifferentiated states? Can one experience one’s subjectivity as well as one’s tendency to feel fractured by the large group because of the inevitable lack of recognition inherent in the large group? For example, Rebecca makes a clear statement about what is happening to her in a large group and states that she thinks this group is useless, that she cannot learn anything here. She may be met by silence, which increases her sense of isolation and increases her feeling that the group has nothing to offer or she may be responded to by one or several people who share her feeling, thereby securing a sub-group in which the members share similar feelings, or someone may instruct her, stating that learning to appreciate what happens to her in the large group can help her better understand what can happen in groups and that this is important. These are all examples of relational experiences that can usefully encourage the large group members to struggle with their feelings, respecting that each member of the large group is dependent upon every other member to create a relational atmosphere in which true dialogue can occur and the large group can begin to develop its own culture.

If, however, the group becomes too overwhelming, if there is too much chaos, members will be unable to remain relational and regressive pulls may dominate. It is here that the leader, operating from a hermeneutics of trust, can make an intervention by observing how difficult it is to be in a setting in which one feels a lack of moorings and expresses appreciation for the efforts being made to form connections that may provide those moorings. This statement is both an empathic
observation as described by Kohut (1959) and a leading edge statement (Tolpin, 2003) in that it provides both recognition of the experience and appreciation of efforts being made to improve mutual recognition and connection. The implications of this are that the leader both recognizes the truth of Rebecca’s feelings, going no further than Rebecca does in her statement, an example of the hermeneutics of trust. She engages empathically with the obvious statement thereby opening a space of trust in which Rebecca and others may find their voices and perhaps be freed to expand on her statement. The assumption is that this young woman, not unlike others, is having a difficult experience, not unusual in a large group, and by speaking to her experience she has both made connections with others, thereby reducing fear, as well as feeling recognized by the leader’s statement. Even though the leader’s comment may have been made to the entire group, it spoke to Rebecca’s dilemma. This kind of recognition has the added benefit of both diminishing empathic ruptures as well as providing an experience-near opportunity to the entire group. It is a somewhat idealized example in that it focuses on the moment-to-moment experience of one large group member when there are perhaps thirty to fifty or more others. The larger context is one in which the voice and experience of the individual can be lost. It is here where I wish to address the large group experience. But before considering new ways to study large group action, it is important to understand some of the earlier history of the study of large groups. Looking through the lens of self/relational and systems theory allows us to recognize that the group is composed of unique individuals and that something new emerges when these individuals are placed in group. I will attempt to expand thinking beyond the perspectives of classical theory but in order to do this effectively, we may wish to consider that current self-psychological and relational theory is in fact rooted in classical ideas. Therefore, exploring some of the earlier evolution of large group theory may prove informative to the reader.

**Early Development of Large Group Theory**

Freud’s examination of group behavior was instrumental in formulating ideas about what happens in groups. His paper “Group psychology and the analysis of the ego” was published in 1921. Though this paper did not initially have a big impact, it gained considerable attention when group therapy was being recognized in the 1930s (Kreeger, 1975, p. 17). Though group treatment was also being explored in the United States, it took the impetus of World War II to formulate large group theory in Great Britain, in an effort to create treatment modalities for a sizeable number of traumatized military populations. Many of the new formulations came from physicians and others who were working with these war-traumatized people on a daily basis.

Beginning in the late 1940s, there were several ground-breaking papers addressing large group experiences (Main, 1946; Foulkes, 1948; Jones, 1953; Rappaport, 1960; Rice, 1965; Bion, 1961). Schiff and Glassman (Kreeger, 1975) directly described what were some potential difficulties resulting from large group experiences:

1. An increased tendency to sub-grouping, with more rigid hierarchies.
2. Less opportunities for individuals to speak.
3. Dilution of affectional ties.
4. Decreasing familiarity with others as individuals, and the tendency to stereotype.
5. Skewing of participation—the leaders being more active and the less active members more silent.
6. The greater threat to the individual.

This straightforward list did serve to describe what was concretely seen. What was also being described was the unconscious aspects of large group membership. A focus on the Freudian unconscious became a primary way in which to understand large group behavior and there were many influences from the Kleinians as well. Perhaps significant is that most of the efforts to understand large group behavior grew out of theories developed clinically in a dyadic relationship. This has often been the case in developing group theory. While this is somewhat inevitable, we must consider the possibility that this transfer of theory from a description of an individual’s personal dynamics to group phenomena can severely constrict the field of group psychotherapy as it is impacted by ideas belonging to another realm of discourse. The large group has also been investigated by sociologists (Hopper, 2002) and others, particularly after World War II, in order to aid the numerous veterans requiring treatment, adding to a body of information that was an attempt not only to broaden information about large groups but also to grapple with the most effective use of the large group. There were those who believed that psychotherapy could occur in the large group and, out of this vision, arose the therapeutic community still in use in many psychiatric hospitals (Jones, 1946). Since many of the early large group theorists were Freudian analysts (Foulkes, Pines, Main) or Kleinian analysts (Bion, Turquet), there was considerable emphasis on processes such as projective identification, and other aggressive and regressive mental processes. An example of this theory building was the work of Wilfred Bion (1961), formulated as a result of his work with veterans. He described basic assumption groups that arose in these group settings. A.K. Rice advanced this work in the United States, where the task of the large group to study its own behavior advanced this work. This model along with group analysis dominates large group work even today.

This focus on traditional theoretical ideas was the primary way in which to view the large group in the post-World War II era. These perspectives, well presented in the book *The Large Group* (1975), edited by Lionel Kreeger, persisted well into the 1970s and 1980s and continue today, relatively unchallenged. But the adherence to these particular theoretical positions has shifted somewhat as
theory has become more influenced by the development of self and relational ideas that offer a view of human engagement that has emerged from investigations of healthy development of the individual. This is reflected in the book, *The Large Group Revisited* (2003). In their introduction, Weinberg and Schneider suggest that:

The large group awakens feelings of anxiety much sooner than we find in smaller groups. This is probably due to the weaker container function of the large group, fluidity of boundaries, and the seemingly chaotic structure which awakens regressed, primary anxiety formation of feelings of fragmentation, disintegration and loss of reality.

(pp. 18–19)

Though these descriptions do not sound significantly different from earlier writings, there appears to be a less rigid embracing of traditional theory. For example, Jarrar (2003), writing from the personal perspective of a large group consultant, suggests that large group members can “become aware of their internal dialogues with the imagined other and transform them into an external and authentic dialogue with the real other. This is, in my view the essence of large group work” (p. 31). She goes on:

The large group provides members with opportunities to explore and learn about difficulties we all have, as subjects, in recognizing other subjects as “Equivalent centers of experience” and enabling a move toward enhancing capacities for mutual recognition in the group. The daunting task of the consultant is to create a culture such that “Where objects were, subjects must be” (Benjamin, 1999, p184).

(p. 31)

Thus, we see an expansion of ideas beyond traditional theory to more relational perspectives that offers large group theoreticians an alternative that addresses the more altruistic potential of the large group.

The recent growth of theoretical ideas has had relatively little to say about group behavior, much less large group behavior. It nonetheless offers a new direction to those who continue to do work with large groups, despite the fact that these more current theorists (Mitchell, Aron, Beebe, Bromberg, Kohut, Benjamin, Lichtenberg, Lachmann, Fosshage, and so on) do not study large groups and, for the most part, rarely address group behavior. Though this study of the group is occurring within self psychology (Harwood, Shapiro, Stone, Segalla), further expansion of theory is needed. The case in relational theories is similar. The work of Billow (2003) expands the work of Klein to include more relational ideas. Grossmark, writing about relational group therapy, includes ideas from the work of Donnel Stern and others (2007). Wright has brought an eclectic sensibility to group work, tuning into the current trends in self and relational theories that influences the formation of new theories of group behavior.

The fact remains that the application of these ideas from dyadic treatment is very much a part of how we attempt to understand group action. Perhaps in our efforts to apply these newer theoretical ideas to group therapy and large group behavior, we will begin to formulate a model that is reflective of the individual and the dyad but which understands, as these early theorists realized, that what happens when people are in groups, much less large group, is something new and often unusual. It is not within the scope of this chapter to explore these very interesting observations. But it would be useful to explore more fully the development of self RELATIONAL GROUP theory as it attempts to understand what is happening both for the individual and for the group as a whole. Returning to the theme of this chapter, I want to reassert that what I wish to explore is whether large group is experienced differently and has different outcomes when the group leaders offer observations and interpretations from experience-near theories that not only speak to defenses or other more traditional mechanisms but also attempt to explore and expand on evidence of many affective efforts to engage relationally.

I am suggesting that interpretations based in more traditional theories, while often quite accurate, create an atmosphere permeated by the more negative aspects of human engagement. I am further suggesting that by not giving sufficient recognition to the positive efforts at engagement in the complicated setting of the large group, we are doing a disservice to the members, who, despite their discomfort and perhaps disequilibrium, continue to make efforts to cross boundaries in a manner that conveys an ardent desire to truly know the other. While recognizing that this task is increasingly difficult as the group numbers increase, it is important to use another, more experience near lens, that will aid us in filling in the picture of large group behavior. In an effort not to create a binary picture of group action, I would like to acknowledge that though my emphasis is on the more relational aspects of the large group, it is with full awareness of the regressive and aggressive pulls that are also present. In fact, one of the reasons to study large groups is to support efforts to create experiences in which people become accustomed to working across the many barriers to communication among groups across all cultures. Returning to Orange’s hermeneutics of trust, we have an opportunity to consider that in addition to self-serving and diminishing behavior that may arise out of experiences of anxiety over a threatening sense of a loss of self, we are all capable of more altruistic aspects of the self that need to be both observed and supported in the large group. Exploring this further may provide us with some new directions in which to study the large group.

**Large Group: A New Look?**

What follows is based on my work as both a co-leader and member of a large group team that has been operating for over twenty years in the Washington School of Psychiatry, Washington, DC, Group Psychotherapy Institute. In this
setting, a training institution, the purpose of the large group is to study its own behavior, aided by the observations of the faculty conductors. There are six weekend conferences over a two-year cycle. Members usually attend all six conferences. Each of the weekends has, as a part of the program, three large group experiences. We, therefore, have the opportunity to observe the large group evolve over the three meetings of a conference weekend as well as the evolution that occurs over the two-year cycle of the institute. Because this large group leader team has remained essentially the same for most of the two decades, it has been interesting to see our evolution as a team. As I consider our shifting perspectives over these decades, I am most interested in how the conduct of the leaders has subtly changed. It is a lovely example of how the cultural shifts, and theory expansion that has been occurring within psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, have simultaneously been incorporated into our work as group conductors. Using ourselves as an example of how we have gradually absorbed the cutting-edge ideas, I will attempt to explore how we have begun to express these ideas in the interpretations that we, the team, make when we are conducting a large group. My primary observation is that our comments and interpretations in the large group have moved away from an emphasis on the regressive, projective, and aggressive aspects of the group interactions toward what Lichtenberg et al. (2003) describe as a more “user friendly approach.” Again, I stipulate that I have not lost sight of the presence of a variety of forces nor do I wish to create a binary picture between our attempts to be relational and the more negative feelings expressed in the large group. The complex interplay of all human behavior is perhaps even more pronounced in the large group.

My focus, therefore, is on how self-psychological and relational theories have had an important impact on large group experiences perhaps because the group leader’s gradual and subtle shift has led to somewhat different responses in the membership. I am suggesting that the cultural context current in the field is changing which impacts both leaders and members, demonstrating the complex interaction between culture and theory. Like many experiences in the field, we did not set out to change our approach but rather we reflect what has been a loosening of the hold of classical Freudian and Kleinian theory in psychoanalysis.

An additional focus has arisen out of what seems to be a gradually unfolding trend in psychoanalysis. It is my observation that there has been, as an outgrowth of the development of these theories that directly address the mutual influence system of therapist and patient, the necessity of ongoing attention to the relational field. This I believe has prompted closer attention to our values and ethics. Therefore, I am also suggesting that this move toward a more humanistic position has also had significant and subtle impacts. The ethical values of therapists and analysts are no longer closeted but are becoming part of mainstream dialogue.

In the next section, I will explore the impact of the relational and self-psychological influence on large group interpretations, attempting to explicate how leaders’ observations from these perspectives have created opportunities for dialogue that supports efforts at connection in the large group. De Mare et al. (1991) call these efforts “impersonal brotherhood.” They arise out of leaders’ comments and the comments of large group members.

Following that, I will address the trend toward a deeper appreciation of the other, evolving perhaps out of what E.O. Wilson (2012) describes as social evolution. It is my hope that both leaders and members of the large group will experience a kind of freedom from focused negativity as we absorb what it truly means to put the other first (Orange, 2011a) and to expand our capacity for mutual recognition in this evolving context.

Shifting Emphasis in the Large Group

In an effort to crystallize what is meant by these shifts, I will describe the parameters of my observations. This shift in the culture of the large group is reflective of the cultural shift within psychoanalysis already outlined. In the large group that I discussed earlier, I am one of five consultants or leaders.

The more personal perspective comes from decades of experience as both leader and member of large groups. Having attended many large groups as part of the A.K. Rice Institute during my tenure in the field, I believe I have experienced the fear and terror so often described by various authors and other members of these groups. I remember being completely blank, without a thought in my head. I also recall speaking out and having my comments ignored, experiencing a diminishment of self. “Wasn’t that a good observation? Does anyone know I am here?” Over time and with many exposures to this setting, these difficult feelings have gradually dissipated, but not completely. That is, they can also occur when I am working as a group leader. Some of my observations fall flat. “Did I miss the mark completely?” What I am suggesting is that being in the large group requires a deep appreciation of the power of the group as well as an understanding that one can have experiences that can feel deeply threatening whatever role you occupy.

My years of experience have created a wish to explore the large group more deeply. Being a consultant/leader and watching the evolution of my own thinking as well as that of my fellow leaders has led to a reconsideration of the guidelines used for so many years by large group consultants. Therefore my remaining comments will be made based on both a long tenure as a large group leader and an appreciation of the vast evolution in psychoanalytic theorizing over the past decades.

The mitigating circumstances are twofold. One, the large group of which I am a part as a faculty member and leader convenes for two-year cycles at the Washington School of Psychiatry. It is composed of members who are in the mental health field and are working to increase their skills as group therapists. The program, know as the National Group Psychotherapy Institute, has from twenty to thirty-five members and eighteen faculty members. In addition, each weekend conference, of which there are six, is part of a two-year cycle that may also include from eight to fifteen attendees who come just for one weekend. These can include people who are interested in the particular conference topic.
or as a requirement of a clinical training program that is also part of the Washington School. This offers a somewhat novel experience each conference weekend. For example, this can include the existing group having difficulty integrating the weekend members. This provides the large group the opportunity to deal with this subgroup that can be characterized as "other." It is not difficult to imagine that the new members can become the object of desire, hate, envy, love, or any emotion, positive or negative. How the work is done can be the source of significant insight into large group behavior. It is at these junctions that we see the activation of the desire to connect with these members as well as the desire to kill off these members. It is here that a more relational approach aids the group in their efforts at inclusion and connection. If, however, the consultants attend primarily to the negative emotional expressions, they may miss opportunities to also observe and comment on the efforts at bonding and inclusion. This two-year institute cycle offers a degree of homogeneity in that the population remains essentially the same for the duration. The attendees being members of small groups that remain the same for the two-year cycle further reinforce this stability. Therefore, the members enter each large group as a member of a sub-group. This provides a kind of familiarity that supports a sense of belonging, reducing the isolation of being in a large group. So rather than entering as a singleton, these attendees join as sub-group members. These circumstances, the continuity provided by the two-year program as well as the support of each member’s process group create a somewhat predictable environment. This can lead to more stability in the large group that is conducive to feeling more relational with other large group members with greater opportunity to appreciate the subjectivity of the other.

The second aspect of large group work that has shaped my view of the large group has been the work of the large group team of which I am a member. This team has remained essentially the same for over two decades. During these years, as part of every conference weekend, the team meets several times to discuss, postulate, and share feelings about how they functioned while in the large group session. We offer encouragement and support as well as observations that might feel critical. The discussion among the five of us is open, honest, and sometimes painfully direct. This has led to an evolution of this team in which there is a freedom in our discussions, an openness to the experience of each other. This is what I would characterize as relational knowing, an appreciation of our subjectivity, extended beyond the dyad that Benjamin so eloquently addresses. We see each other as subjects and are responsive to each other’s vulnerabilities. When we have difficulties, we feel safe in working them through to a better understanding. The intimacy that has developed over time has also been nurtured by the presence of an observer. This is a faculty member who is not on the team who offers observations about the team’s interactions, often spurring us on to deeper and more meaningful work. This emphasis on open and constant attention to our relational needs supplies necessary selfobject experiences to each of us.

The team’s relational work sets the stage for new kinds of opportunities for large group members. It is, I believe, by providing relational experiences to large group members that an important culture begins to emerge. That is, by having access to our own relational needs on the team, we bring to the large group a particular sensibility that fosters efforts at connection. We enter each large group with a desire for compassionate understanding for the work of both the team and the membership. Once again, I wish to point out that there are also experiences that may feel damaging to particular group members. One of the important parts of the work is the effort made, by group members, to heal the inevitable empathic ruptures. These ruptures, as they are worked through, often lead to deeper connections among group members and also add to the intimacy that can occur when people successfully reconnect. We enter each group with a sense of compassionate understanding. This position has created an atmosphere of a particular sensitivity about the potential impact of group experiences signaling a sense of safety to the members. The sociocultural field of large group is also reflective of the inner world of each member and consultant. This will be explored in greater detail in the following section.

Expanding Self and Relational Theories: Large Group Experiences

Returning to influences from self and relational theories as they have impacted my large group work, I will explore these ideas in more detail. As I have indicated earlier, these theoretical ideas emerged out of dyadic clinical experience; therefore application to large group work is an effort to expand the efficacy of the theories with recognition that they lose some of their explanatory effectiveness, as they become less experience near in regard to larger entities such as large groups.

What has emerged from the study of large groups that parallels in an uncanny way the development of these theories is the work of Patrick de Mare and colleagues (1991). Writing at about the same time, his ideas about large and median groups appear to be somewhat congruent with these dyadic theories. His emphasis is on the sociocultural dimensions most apparent in larger groups. He states, “The large group now shows us the other side of the coin to the inner world, namely the socio-cultural dimension in which these interpersonal relationships take place” (p. 3). He distinguishes between the inner world of the individual and the outer world of the culture:

The problem for the individual is the intrusion into the individual situation of the repressed unconscious. For the large group on the other hand, it is consciousness that is in jeopardy, both for the individual and for the group’s equivalent of consciousness, namely communication and organization. The problem for the rudimentary large group is its mindlessness: not how to feel, but how to think.

(p. 13)
He views the purpose of the large group as that of “humanizing the group as opposed to socializing the individual” (p. 25). Going on he states: “We are troubled by the discrepancy between individual mind and culture; how effectively to hasten mutuality between them? We pose the possibility that culture can be explored more adequately in a setting that is larger than the small group” (p. 25). His position reminds us of how our efforts to be relational, to establish intimate connections in the dyad or small group, become something different when we consider larger groups.

In the Foreword of Koinonia, Pamela Pomerance Steiner writes:

At a large group conference, De mare stated: “It is aimless,” as the session came to a close. Therein lay his message. Only in seemingly aimless discussion could a higher aim be realized: to understand large group dynamics, and to learn to communicate more freely with others.

(p. xvii)

This mirrors Gadamer’s (1998) important observation about dyadic conversation:

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led.

(p. 383)

We can see from these quotes that both dyads and groups must deal with the unpredictability of human engagement. As Benjamin points out, the task of the dyad is to come to the recognition of the subjectivity of both members of the dyad. The struggle of a small group compounds the efforts to appreciate the subjectivity of each member of the small group. The large group’s task is somewhat different. It is here that the demands of the culture are paramount. De Marc sees large group as frustrating, leading to hate, and that it is a necessary task of the large group, through dialogue, to transform hate into “impersonal brotherhood.”

This idea of impersonal brotherhood offers to large group theorizing what relational and self-psychological theories offer to dyads and small groups. Appreciating our inevitable embeddedness in the larger culture is an ongoing issue for all therapeutic endeavors. The implications for not attending to the larger culture are that we ignore the reality of the many cultural differences that are always present. As Sperry (2013) suggests: “Psychoanalysis will be limited in appeal and so will our ability as to work effectively with culturally diverse populations, if we fail to reflect on our embeddedness in systems that support Western perspectives and values” (p. 89). This problem is also significant for large groups in which members from different races and cultures become victims of the large group in which the majority of the members have similar backgrounds. It is in the large group that the damage resulting from this obliviousness to cultural issues can be most destructive for the members who do not share the same values as their fellow group members. Sperry goes on to suggest that: “Cultivating cultural dialogue requires a willingness to be exposed but offers the hope that by expanding our ‘horizons’ (Gadamer, 1991) we may discover human similarity while learning from our differences” (p. 89).

Returning to self and relational theories, how can these ideas be effective in understanding and working with larger groups? Is it necessary to attempt to consider the effectiveness of these theoretical structures in a setting so unlike individual and small group treatment? The large group is made up of individuals so it seems useful to make some effort at importing and expanding self and relational theory in considering large group experience. What has been most influential in my own thinking about dyadic, couple, and group treatment is the work of Kohut, Stolorow, Atwood, Brandchaft, Orange, and Lichtenberg et al. as well as many relational theorists such as Benjamin, Mitchell, and others.

Beginning with Kohut (1959), his emphasis on empathy as the primary tool of observation in clinical work as well as his selfobject theory has had a significant impact on psychoanalytic work. His ideas were quickly applied to group theory as I indicated earlier. Therefore, when I enter large group, I am sustained by my wish to remain empathically connected to each member as well as to the group as a whole, a more challenging task. This requires appreciating that each member and leader has a need for mature selfobject experiences, mirroring idealizing and twinnship as well as other selfobject experiences. I can see these needs being expressed in various encounters among group members. It is understandable however, that having these met in large group is very difficult. Therefore, it is essential that the large group supply something akin to selfobject experiences. I have called these needs, to feel a part of something larger than the self, groupobject experiences (Segalla, 1996). That is, the group itself provides a sense of being a member of the tribe, a social need inherent in all of us. The need to be part of a community, to be embedded in something larger than the self, I call the need for groupobject experiences. This emphasis on affiliation mirrors the work of Lichtenberg et al. (2011), who describe as one of seven motivational systems, the need for affiliative experiences that exist quite apart from the need for basic attachment to others. It is also necessary to keep in mind the inevitability of the intersubjective field in which every engagement is constantly being co-created by all those present. Again, it is not easy to imagine co-created experiences in the large group. Does it mean members in this large group are each and everyone, part of each and every unfolding group event? Or can we generalize and suggest that the complex field of large group is the product of all present? Thus, when we refer to “the group,” we are noting the inevitable interconnectedness of every person present. Orange (1995), writing about holding our theories lightly, provides a wonderful incentive to viewing large group as a non-fixed entity that defies full
description, offering us the opportunity to view group action in a fluid way without being held to a theoretical structure which limits how we engage with the large group.

Moving on to the relational theorists, their influence further frees me from any idea of creating a theoretical perspective that defines and thus ultimately limits large group experiences. The work of Mitchell (1988), making his own efforts to understand the vast array of psychoanalytic theories, offers the view that we selectively integrate theories and traditions that may expand and enrich psychoanalysis. The large numbers of psychoanalysts offering unique contributions to the field capture the imaginative opening of the field, the product of the past quarter-century of creative expansion and redefinition. We can expand further by examining the large group culture of psychoanalysis. It is in this large group that we can see what exists in any large group: competition, envy, hate, as well as collaboration, caring, goodwill, and thoughtfulness. There are trends in our field that examine our attitudes, our values, our sensitivity and vulnerability, encouraging greater openness. As we open the space for more of these experiences, we offer hope not just for the individual but also for each individual existing in the larger culture.

Though self-psychology and relational theories have had a profound impact on my own thinking and have had, almost inevitably, been incorporated into my practice with individuals, couples, and groups, they have still not been sufficient to explain large group action. This requires that as psychologists and mental health practitioners it becomes increasingly clear that we must look to other fields to help us to better grasp cultural impacts. It is essential to consider as our world becomes more connected and continues to be troubled by the vast and endless array of cultural issues and problems.

Large Group: A Sampling

The group, second of three occurring at the end of year one of a two-year institute cycle, opens in silence. The chairs, arranged in a spiral, are filled except for two in the center, indicating that two members are missing since there are enough chairs for five consultants and the group members. Thomas breaks the silence: “Well, why are there empty chairs? Who is missing and where are they? There was no announcement about any absences!” This is indignantly stated. Jane, speaking from the center of the circle responds: “If the empty chairs disturb you, why don’t you come up here and fill one of them?” Barbara interjects: “I don’t think his concern is about filling the chairs as much as who is missing.” “I know,” Jane rejoins, “but he always sits in the back row, I was just giving him the chance to get a different perspective.” Matt enters the conversation: “Hey, let’s not get lost in the details here. I want to know where Alicia and Rosie are, they were here this morning, and does anyone know where they are?” Matt’s question begins a group discussion with several members saying that they had seen them talking after lunch. Elizabeth picks up the question of the absence more directly. “I am annoyed! We were discussing something pretty important this morning and now everyone is happy to focus outside the room about where the missing people may be. I think we are avoiding talking to each other right now.” Tom joins in, “Yeah, that’s why I was concerned about the empty chairs. We were really into important things and Alicia was a part of that conversation so I want her here.” Sally responds, “So why did you talk about empty chairs instead of expressing concern about where Alicia and Rosie were? You can be so indirect.” “That’s true but I was being direct. I didn’t know who was missing because I couldn’t see who was missing!” Tension begins to build, the group lapses into silence once more. Consultant One states, “There is an urgency about missing members. We can speculate about why that is.” “Well,” responds Lee, “Alicia and Rosie are important members. I want to hear what they have to say. They help move things forward in here.”

In a relationally influenced group, a consultant may observe that the anxiety over the missing members is reflective of the group’s fear of a loss of the cohesiveness that has developed over the first year of the institute. The anxiety over the loss of attachment may have been engendered by the fact that the group would not be meeting for five months. It is interesting to consider that groups develop attachment needs as well as attachment styles as is seen in the child and its caregiver.

The group dialogue continues. Alicia and Rosie enter twenty minutes late and go to the center of the circle, filling the empty chairs. Once again the group falls silent. Neither Alicia nor Rosie offers an explanation for the absence but it is obvious that Alicia has been crying. Edward breaks the silence, “It looks like you are feeling bad Alicia. We were wondering where you and Rosie were.” The silence continues. Louise Ann, a member who rarely speaks states sympathetically, “Did something happen Alicia, was it anything to do with this morning’s group?” Alicia begins to cry, “I didn’t want to come back. Rosie convinced me. When Mary Lou started telling us about her car accident and her severe injury something happened to me. I can’t explain what it was but I felt really frightened and wanted to jump up and run out of the room and not come back because this is our last Institute until next October.” Four or more people urge Alicia to continue to speak. The group seems on high alert. Consultant Two interjects, “The tension suggests that members may be ambivalent about focusing on Alicia’s difficulty. Is there an unaddressed need
to explore why the group feels so disrupted?” Alan, sounding angry, states, “We were getting close to some important things this morning, with the whole group really working together. Now we’re spending all our time on one person’s issues. I think we’d rather hear about Alicia’s story than talk about this group not meeting for five months. Why are tears so compelling anyway? Is anyone else feeling impatient? I’m afraid we’re losing the spark we had this morning.” Consultant Three suggests, “The group disruption is reflective of some anxiety stirred up by the talk of trauma and loss in this morning’s meeting. This is demonstrated by the chaos occurring in this session.” His comment is met by more silence. The end of the session is fast approaching. Consultant Four adds, “There has been little reference to trauma yet it is being alluded to by several people. What might the group be avoiding?” Members glance at each other but no one speaks. The group ends with members streaming out of the room except for a small group gathered around Alicia who begins to cry again. There is one more session, occurring the following day, before the institute ends until next October.

**Consultant’s Meeting**

The five consultants retire to another room to discuss the group. “Wow, what was going on in there, it was so fragmented!” Consultant Four exclaims. Consultant Five adds, “I felt so caught up in the process, I couldn’t think of anything to say. The emphasis is on thinking but I think I was feeling really blank. Nothing felt available to me. I was having a hard time staying involved.” Consultant One states, “It feels like there is some big secret or something. I wonder if something happened in one of the small groups that hasn’t been brought into the large group.” “And I wonder,” Consultant Two adds, “if Alicia is carrying something for the group. Her tears certainly captured everyone’s attention.” “Does anyone else feel disorganized besides me?” This is stated by Consultant Three. “I am feeling that there is something traumatic operating here. I know I was caught up in Mary Lou’s accident story this morning. It is clear that she is physically impaired. I wonder if people are avoiding talking about that and I wonder about the shooting spree in Colorado too. It is pretty amazing that there were absolutely no references to that even though it only happened last week.” Consultant Two agrees, “It is unusual that there were no comments about either situation. It certainly reinforces my feeling that Alicia is carrying the trauma for the group. We were trapped in silence too. I think there were only four or five observations made by us. I’m concerned that whatever is going on will not be addressed tomorrow and that we will go into the long break with things being really chaotic.” Consultant Four questions, “So are you saying that we need to get more active or something? So what if the group continues to be disrupted? Don’t forget, this is the middle session. We often see this disruption, whether or not there is trauma in the air.” Consultant Three states, “I agree, we seem as fragmented as the group! What is everyone feeling and are we carrying something that belongs in the group? We know that there is no one thing going on. I am sure Mary Lou’s accident and impairment is part of the picture but it isn’t the only thing happening. I am much more interested in the absences rather than what is present. Why hasn’t Colorado been mentioned by them or by us?” The discussion continues to unfold with consultants becoming more personal about their feelings about the trauma both in the group and in the larger culture. Consultant Two says “I am feeling disrupted. Talk about auto accidents feels too close for me. It certainly stirred up my own distress from last year when I was hurt.” “Do you need to talk about that?” asks Consultant Three. “No, no, that isn’t necessary but I am sure that I am not the only person activated. I don’t feel like I am avoiding talking about it—you all know the details. My point is that there seems to be a lot of undisclosed feelings and I think the Colorado disaster is the big bomb, so to speak. No one wants to feel vulnerable before we break for the summer and talk about that is sure to stir people up—including us.”

The observer is asked for her comments both about the large group and the consultant’s group before it winds down. “I agree that the comments about the impact of trauma both in the large group and on the team are very important. The large group was rather chaotic, but as you pointed out, that is often the case in the middle session. The anxiety about the loss of support of the group because of the long break is a part of the picture but I think the fact that the group continues to avoid Colorado is being unconsciously supported by all of you. You need to ask yourselves why it is that you did not pick up on the illusions in the group about Colorado. It seems to me that there were enough indirect references that you could have explored. So, I think that the avoidance is possibly emanating from all of you. In our next session, I think we need to open this issue up for further examination. Is there some trauma operating right here with all of you? M. comes to mind—that was a trauma the team suffered as well as the loss of L.” “Thanks B. I think you are right on—back to the big issues,” states Consultant One. The meeting comes to an end.

**Another Example**

Re-emphasizing the importance of relational approaches to large group, I recently led two large groups, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, that
were a new experiment for Institute of Contemporary Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis. These large groups were part of an annual conference in which the discussion portion of the day usually follows a format in which audience members, using a mike, direct comments or observations to the guest presenter. This change reflected the topic, race, and culture. The large groups began almost immediately with lively exchanges among many audience members who had received directions to address their comments to fellow conference members. I was initially amazed at the level of discourse occurring in the group in both the morning and the afternoon sessions. As I analyzed the events, I explored why this readiness to openly discuss rather delicate issues was so actively embraced. My conclusions have supported the usefulness and importance of relationally driven approaches to group work. This organization has many members who have had a long history of involvement in the organization. Many of the conference attendees had long histories with other ICP&P members. This served to create a trusting atmosphere of attachment and recognition among conference members. It also allowed others, non-members, to be supported by the open engagement that was present, thereby encouraging them to add their voices and important comments. These large groups were reflective of the importance of developing a relational atmosphere in any organization, thus facilitating open dialogue in which people can feel trusting and connected to each other. This conference group had over one hundred attendees who because of the trust that had been built in the organization over time (a major stated goal of the organization) were able to conduct themselves in a large group in such a way as to make it feel more like a small group. It demonstrates that people in large groups can come together, given a safe and caring container to, in fact, begin to experience “impersonal brotherhood.”

Summary and Conclusion

Though I am hopeful that the shift in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy will ultimately also prove useful for the study of large groups, it has become more apparent to me that we may need to venture into new fields such as conflict resolution to deepen our understanding. The words of de Mare and colleagues (1991) offer the most optimistic conclusions for me. I will end with two quotes from his writings:

The miniculture of the large group emerges as a result of dialogue. This emerging miniculture then provides the group with a perspective from which it is able to view socio-cultural and subculture assumptions that are being taken for granted. The large group minicultures have the effect of expanding consciousness and so provides an ethnocultural springboard that can distance itself from the unconscious biological and sociological cultures; these can then be de mythologized.

(p. 19)

Speaking ideologically de Mare goes on:

the larger group is a microculture of society, with the distinction that we can address it and be answered by it. It is the watershed between the world and the personal, individual experiential mind. It has features of the unconscious mind, with the unique distinction of being like a dream in dialogue; it offers us the opportunity to humanize both the individual and society concurrently.

(p. 21)

Acknowledgments

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Marvin Skolnick, MD, and Lamis Jurrar, PhD, large group leaders par excellence. It is also dedicated to fellow members of the large group team: Mary Dluhy, MSW, Mary Ann Dubner, PhD, Leon Paparella, MSW, Michael Stiers, PhD, and Ayana Watkins-Northern, PhD.

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