INTRODUCTION

Background, Structure and Dynamics of the Large Group

Haim Weinberg and Stanley Schneider

Historical background

The impetus for this book arose out of the burgeoning interest in recent years in the large group. In the early 1970s, studying the large group became part of the educational curriculum in some training programs in group analysis. But it was only in 1972 that the Institute of Group Analysis and the Group Analytic Society (London) formally included the large group experience as an experiential part of their conferences. Many international and local group conferences (e.g. those run by the American Group Psychotherapy Association, the International Group Psychotherapy Association, the Eastern Group Psychotherapy Association, Israel Group Psychotherapy Association, and others) followed suit and now include the large group experience as part of their programs. In addition, therapeutic communities and psychiatric facilities make use of the large group in unit and ward meetings. A collection of papers on the large group (Kreeger 1975) and a special issue of the journal Group appeared in order to meet the need for understanding of large group processes; however, what is still lacking is a clear exposition and description of the theoretical, technical and practical aspects of technique with regard to the large group. This book attempts to fill that vacuum.

What we should be noting now is the date or period of time that large groups have been in vogue, but we find it is very difficult to pinpoint a time
period when group psychotherapists began to focus on the dynamics and theoretical underpinnings of the large group.

We could look at Le Bon’s (1952; originally published in 1896) classic work, *The Crowd*, as a philosophical beginning in studying the psychology of large numbers of people who come together – or, as Le Bon subtitled his work: ‘A Study of the Popular Mind.’ Le Bon felt that individuals who join a crowd subjugate their individual self, unique personality traits and moral values in order to be part of a large amorphous whole and this releases the ‘wild’ part of one’s personality. The individual in the crowd operates on a lower ethical and personality level, losing individuality and revealing ‘quasi-psychopathic leanings’ with weaker superego functions and with reduced feelings of guilt and anxiety. The reason for the behavioral change is due to the fact that the crowd gives to the individual a feeling of power while at the same time diffusing power and responsibility – which paradoxically transforms the individual from part of a crowd to an anonymous individual within the crowd. The crowd has tremendous power over the individual and has a contagious effect. We only have to look at political and sporting events around the world in order to be able to see the effects of a crowd.

Or possibly we should look to Bion’s (1961) book *Experiences in Groups* as a starting point since this work serves as a basic guideline for Tavistock, A. K. Rice Group Relations Conferences and the Leicester Conferences; Bion led groups at Tavistock, and Rice was one of his group members (cf. Riech 1981). As an aside, it’s important to note that Rice (1965) viewed the large group in leader-centered terms, and even called his text *Learning for Leadership*. While this is not exactly what we have in mind with regard to large group dynamics, we can nonetheless see how influential large group theory can be with regard to practical applications.

The concept of the large group was applied in another direction by Main (1946), who began to view the therapeutic institution, in this case the psychiatric hospital, as a large therapeutic group. Main’s experience came from the Second Northfield Experiment where a cadre of pioneering intellectuals advanced the idea of a therapeutic community and therapeutic milieu (Harrison 2000). However, the real pioneer in advancing the concept of the large group to the sphere of therapeutic communities was Maxwell Jones (1953). For the first time, psychiatry became cognizant of

the important

(Schneider 1991)

From a theoretical perspective, the socio-therapeutic view of Bion’s principles was

With this specific reference in mind, we refer to group therapy for the first time between small and large groups. De Maré feels (Whiteley 1991) the importance of understanding the concept of the large group.

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States who, in group theory,

**Definition**

We now need to understand what constitutes the group for the large group. Optimal group theory, allowing for up...
the importance of social factors in treating larger numbers of patients (Schneider 1978).

From a theoretical vantage point, Marshall Edelson (1970) was instrumental in applying large group theory and principles in understanding how socio-therapy can deal with inter- and intra-group tensions. While Edelson viewed therapeutic community meetings as task-oriented (shades of Bion’s concepts), Foulkes (1964, 1975) utilized group analytic principles with larger groups that were not necessarily task-oriented.

With this as a backdrop, de Maré (1972, 1985, 1989, de Maré et al. 1991) entered the fray. De Maré, coined the phrase ‘the larger group,’ to refer to groups that had numbers above the usual and traditional amount. For the first time we had a theoretical framework that distinguished between small groups, ‘regular’ groups, median groups and large groups. De Maré feels that ‘the capacity for change in the large group is immense’ (Whiteley and Gordon 1979, p.128). We now began to appreciate the importance of larger groups in terms of a capacity for change, as well as for understanding culture and society.

In 1975 Kreeger edited a volume entitled The Large Group: Dynamics and Therapy. For the first time, a collection of papers centering around the theme of the large group attempted to quantify and qualify the concept. Some of the original papers (by Foulkes, Main, Turquet, de Maré, Hopper and Weyman, and Pines) have become classics. This book appears over 25 years later, and shows how large group theory has evolved and helps explain culture, institutions, organizations and…even individuals. We have experts, clinicians and theoreticians from seven countries (Austria, Germany, Israel, Italy, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States) who, in 14 papers, guide us through the intricate web of large group theory and practice.

Definition of terms

We now need to define our terms. What should be the size of a group, and what constitutes a large group? As de Maré, (1972) writes: ‘The problem for the member of the small group is how to feel spontaneously…whereas for the large group it is primarily how to think’ (p.106). Small groups optimally have between 7 and 12 members, with some theoreticians allowing for up to 15. Gosling (1981) even writes about very small groups
of five members. The median group, as defined by de Maré et al. (1991), note 'that the figure of 18–20 members appears to be the appropriate size for...median groups' (p.16). Others (Storck 2002) note the more accepted standard of 15–30. In order to obviate the need for a precise categorization, de Maré's terms: 'the larger group' (1991, p.15) and 'the larger-sized-group approach' (1990, p.115), counts 20 and upwards. We generally count large group membership as anything above 30–35. Turquet (1975) addresses himself to large groups of 40–80 (p.87). However, large groups can include many hundreds of participants, or even more if we include societal groups: ethnic, cultural, political, etc. (Volkan 2001).

Not only do numbers change the physical characteristics of a group, but the dynamics and character of the group also change with the numbers of group members. As Turquet (1975) notes: '...with such numbers the group can no longer be face to face' (p.88). This, in effect, categorizes the dynamic understanding of the large group: such large numbers do not allow for intimacy but rather can engender feelings of difference and alienation. This raises a technical issue that has psychological importance: how to plan the seating arrangements. Having only one large circle doesn't allow the conductor(s) to recognize those sitting at the other end of a large room. It creates a feeling of a large cavernous body without the ability to contain; metaphorically a womb that is unable to be fertile. What has proved to be more efficacious (although not without drawbacks) are 'three to five concentric circles' (Turquet 1975, p.88) that enable group participants to be closer to one another. However, this gives rise to a situation where some participants are facing the backs of others and this can foster paranoid thoughts, as well as a dizzy, convoluted feeling. Add to this the common practice that more seasoned veterans of large group experiences usually sit within the 'inner' circle and/or close to the conductor(s), and we de facto awaken feelings of superiority and inferiority.

**Purpose**

What is the purpose of the large group? This can be viewed as a 'trick' question because large groups, as societal, educational and political structures, exist anyhow. But we do artificially create large group settings in order for participants to learn experientially what large group processes
actually are. In general the consensus holds that large group experiences are not, in or of themselves, psychotherapy. A notable exception is Springmann (1975), who discusses the large ward meeting on a psychiatric ward. Today, we would refer to this type of 'psychotherapy' more as a large therapeutic community, and not psychotherapy proper.

We utilize the large group experience as a laboratory in which to study large group processes, both conscious and unconscious, as a way of understanding their impact and influence upon social, organizational and systemic thinking, feelings and actions. The large group is not capable of dealing with the specific feelings and pains of the individual and can often intensify feelings of aloneness. It cannot function as a form or type of psychotherapy, although, in some participants, it may engender feelings of containment. The large group is, however, an important tool in understanding social interactive processes and interrelationships within society. As de Maré writes: 'The large group... offers us a context and a possible tool for exploring the interface between the polarized and split areas of psychotherapy and sociotherapy. This is the area of the inter-group and of the transdisciplinary...' (1975, p.146).

Foulkes (1964) delineated multiple dimensions that operate within the group. He wrote that we could discern four levels 'from surface deeper and hidden aspects' (p.114). The last level, 'the primordial level' (p.115), corresponds to the deepest unconscious level of Freud and the collective unconscious level of Jung. Powell (1994, p.16) wonders ('wishful thinking') how Foulkes attributed primordial images to Freud. In Foulkes' own words: 'it is always the transpersonal network which is sensitized and gives utterance, or responds. In this sense we can postulate the existence of a group "mind"... ' (1964, p.118). We can see from the spiralic transversencies that arise within the large group the parallelisms that occur within the social interactional environment known as the societal microcosm: The large group reflects not only what is occurring in the here-and-now, but also relates on a transferential level what is occurring in the organization, conference, political climate, etc.

The participant in the large group learns how to be a good 'citizen' in the group and/or society. As de Maré et al. note: 'large groups are tilted towards socio-cultural awareness. Citizenship is only adequately observable in a larger setting... ' (1991, p.11). As a citizen one learns how to influence others and also how impotent we all may be. The large group
participant develops connections and feelings of belonging to society – the large whole – and not to a specific subgroup. This enables participants to take a more active role (emotionally if not actually physically) and to 'take in other people’s points of view' (James 1994, p.60). This is 'important to the development of citizenship' (James 1994, p.60).

The large group helps in role differentiation and integration in developing both individual and group identity. These identities can include gender, political, religious, ethnic, etc. As these individual identity traits emerge, they are always in the context of the large group: for comparison, to accentuate difference, or to imitate.

The large group is an ideal venue for investigating issues of leadership and authority. The Tavistock Conferences explore these issues within clearly defined boundaries, which is often perceived as engendering feelings of alienation and loneliness. In organizational consultation, the large group is also used in order to explore conflicts and tensions within organizational structures. As de Maré et al. (1991) write: 'large groups provide a setting in which we can explore our social myths (the social unconscious) and where we can begin to bridge the gap between ourselves and our socio-cultural environment…' (p.10).

The large group participant is the 'individual' within the 'crowd.' This is, generally, an uncomfortable feeling. The individual feels like a cog in a wheel, losing part of his individuality and being pulled by regressive large group dynamics. One feels in limbo between conscious and unconscious dynamics, with the collective unconscious adding its weight to the regressive phenomena. And there is a regressive pull in the area of separation–individuation, between self and other. On the one hand there is the need to belong and feel part of and contained, and on the other hand, an opposing pull towards separation and individuation. It's very hard to maintain one’s sense of self against the onslaught of large group/crowd dynamics.

**Dynamic processes**

The dynamic processes, specifically the projective processes, are different in the large group from what we find in other, smaller group constellations. 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 repressed, primary anxiety formations of feelings of fragmentation, disintegration and loss of reality. ‘In a Large Group the single member feels threatened and isolated and a sense of helplessness in the face of chaos is dominant’ (Ricciardi von Platen 1996, p.486). Group participants try to find order and make sense of the chaos so as not to feel lost, alone, isolated, and possibly have ‘a fear of breakdown’ (Winnicott 1974, p.87) and disappear. They feel ‘a threat of annihilation...a very real primitive anxiety’ (Winnicott 1956, p.303) or, as Kohut described it, disintegration anxiety: ‘The core of disintegration anxiety is the anticipation of the breakup of the self...’ (1977, p.104). Some large group participants may sense the increasing anxiety and sit next to someone they know, or within a subgroup structure which may separate according to nationality, religion, gender, socio-economic divisions, etc. And then there is the individual who protects the self by staying a ‘singleton’ (Turquet 1975), the one who is alone within the crowd.

It is not easy to talk in the large group. There are some participants who feel that if they talk even only once, they have broken the ice and achieved something major. This risking of self may also enable them to try again. And there are others who are silent for the entire large group experience, because the anxiety associated with attempting to talk and then to deal with whether what they say is accepted, or mocked, etc. is too much for them to handle.

Another important ‘technical’ factor that has importance for the large group experience is the ability to hear what is being said. We refer to hearing both as sensory auditory input and auditory perception. While the former relates more to physiology and acoustic structure, the latter includes emotional auditory perception. We often observe in large groups the difficulty participants have with ‘hearing’ – obviously an important part of the large group process. Both aspects, physical and emotional, need to be taken into account by conductors of large groups. An interesting phenomenon that occurs in the large group experience that is spread over several sessions, is that the group participants in the first or earlier sessions complain that they cannot ‘hear.’ Miraculously, after this initial auditory ‘blockage,’ group members do hear and recall what they didn’t hear earlier on. We clearly see how emotions, especially anxiety, can block even abstract thinking processes and regress participants to a more concrete...
mode of understanding (Schneider 1987). This shift from flexible feeling and thinking to a more inflexible mode is a predictable part of the psychodynamic process in large groups.

Feelings of alienation are most prominent in the individual who has become part of a crowd, or large group. This is because in the large group there is a feeling of being alone among a large mass of people, not connected to anyone, feeling very alone and isolated. The fact that important visual and other perceptual cues are either absent or lost in the crowd, prevents the individual from gauging the body language of others. The intersubjective experience is missing. For those who are used to more fulfilling experiences in smaller group situations, the large group is an initially jolting experience. The expectation of containment, warmth and acceptance is experienced differently in the large group. Sometimes the ‘wandering participant’ phenomenon occurs. This is where a large-group participant feels alone and without any grounding and moves to another part of the large group in order to try and receive warmth and holding from others. This wandering often brings with it a response opposite to that expected. Often the participants who feel intruded upon react with anger and rejection. Instead of finding acceptance, holding and empathy, the ‘wandering participant’ feels even more isolated and alienated.

Individual identity undergoes a type of transformation. Those who are strongly identified with their own self are able to accept the rollercoaster effect that the large group has on their individual identity. However, there are those who feel lost when exposed to a large group experience. These individuals feel that their basic coping skills are deficient, and are not able to separate their own self from the others in the large group. One feels a regressive pull towards joining and merger and now seeks out the other in order to form an identity. This blurring of identity and boundaries is a distinct possibility in the large group. In order to re-assert control over one’s own identity, there is the possibility of acting out in order to create a strong statement of ‘here I am.’ This can be expressed verbally as the participant blurs out something to the large group that is not in line with what would normally be expected. However, this ‘statement’ is necessary in order for the group participant to assert his or her identity.

At times the group participant feels the unconscious need to assert oneself and defend ‘the flag.’ When one feels attacked and identity is shaky, the counter-phobic reaction is to overextend and bend over
backwards in order to reinforce and strengthen one’s identity. This arises out of a fear of losing one’s identity.

Main (1975), in a pioneering paper, discusses projective processes and reality-testing in the large group. Main tries to explain why the participant in the large group may often have the feeling of unreality – a type of divorce from reality. This is not a psychotic split but rather a protective mechanism allowing the participant to ‘float’ above what is going on so as eventually to find a comfortable level of containment and functioning. As Main (1975) writes: ‘In malignant projective identification…with the ego impoverished by loss of a major part of the self, reality-testing becomes defective’ (p.63). If one projects into another, there is something missing in oneself – this is the feeling of unreality: ‘...many individuals because of projective loss now become “not themselves”’ (p.69). This feeling of unreality mixes with feelings of ‘depersonalization and personality invasion…accompanied by bizarre object-relations…’ (Main 1975, p.64).

Due to the frustration that may arise in the large-group participant, anger and hate may erupt in potentially uncontrollable ways. De Maré describes this as a necessity in understanding and accepting the importance of the ‘larger-sized-group approach’ (1990, p.115). One needs to have ‘an appreciation of the significant relationship of hate as the driving power of mind and mental energy’ (de Maré 2002, p.205). We see polarization of feelings and affects in the large group: splitting, extremism, prejudice and stereotypical thoughts, feelings and behaviors in the large group. A knowledge and awareness of projective processes can help the conductor(s) be better able to understand the group process and judiciously know when, and when not, to intervene.

Outline of the book

We have divided the book into two main sections: ‘The Large Group: Theory and Technique,’ which contains seven chapters and ‘The Large Group: Application to Society,’ which contains six chapters. The book ends with an Epilogue.

The first section of our book opens with an interesting contribution from Lamis Jarrar (USA). Jarrar, who leads workshops in the Tavistock and A. K. Rice traditions, writes from the perspective of a consultant, clinician and trainer who is attempting to analyze the large group unconscious.
Equally adept at object relations and Kleinian theory, Jarrar looks at how polarizations need to, and can, be bridged in order to reach the 'other,' while taking into account the consultant's biases and prejudices. Large group participants and the conductor's identities interact with each other, as the large group venue enables transforming and transformative dialogues to take place.

Malcolm Pines (UK) gives a comprehensive description of the history of the large group and its various appearances in different cultures, starting with Trigant Burrow's pioneering yet forgotten research in America in the second decade of the twentieth century. Pines' rich experience with groups around the world allows him to recount the story of the large group in countries such as France, Argentina and South Africa. Pines has been a pioneer in the study of group process in general and large group process in particular, especially in the context of transcultural understanding.

Earl Hopper (UK) outlines several propositions about aggression in the large group, leaning on his fourth basic assumption of 'Incohesion: Aggregation/Massification.' He starts with the intriguing idea that not all social systems are groups, specifies the targets, functions and forms of aggressive feelings in the large group, and explains assassination, character assassination and scapegoating in the light of the fourth basic assumption. A true trailblazer in the theoretical and philosophical understanding of group process, in developing the fourth basic assumption Hopper took great courage and put himself on the firing line against many old-time hardliners who were resistant to new understandings and interpretations. This chapter also includes some of his ideas about leaders and their vulnerabilities.

In recent years we have witnessed a proliferation of studies on the dynamic unconscious and intersubjectivity operating in all psychotherapeutic encounters. In the large group the potential for strong underlying unconscious processes is greater than in any other therapeutic context. Stanley Schneider (Israel) looks at the mystical and spiritual dimensions of the large group experience. His chapter also looks at Kabbalistic and Buddhistic understandings of mystical awareness and unconscious communication.

Chaos and order are themes that predominate in the large group experience. In attempting to inject some order into understanding the large group, Gerhard Wilke (UK) points out that although group analysts,
following Foulkes, understood how the group matrix could have a healing power, widening and deepening the communication among its members, they failed to transfer this optimistic attitude from the small into the large group setting. He analyzes three generations of group therapists, starting from Bion and Foulkes, and concludes that we now have the chance to integrate the work of the ‘grandparents’ and the ‘parents’ into preventative and curative models in large group work.

No study on large group processes could be complete without a theoretical understanding of Bion’s contributions, and Robert Lipgar (USA), who has recently produced two books on Bion and group process, does justice to the task. Lipgar, building on Bion, describes his own experience with starting a large group in the Manteno Mental Health Hospital in Illinois, USA, in the early 1960s. It is interesting to follow the difficulties he encountered in starting a large group experience on the psychiatric ward. His persistence and consistency, in true Bionic tradition, were the main reasons why this adventure had positive outcomes. Lipgar summarizes aspects of Bion’s thinking that influenced his work and concludes that ‘large group meetings work best when leadership is able to bring to the meeting a clear understanding of the distinctive purpose of the gathering.’

Projective processes are the ‘bread-and-butter’ of large groups. Joseph Berke (UK) has worked with Maxwell Jones and R. D. Laing and has learned through these associations how malignant projective processes can be crucial in developing therapeutic community programs. Berke, one of the founders of the Arbours programs in London, a pioneer program in the containment and treatment of persons in emotional distress, describes the power of projective processes in the large group. Berke’s mixture of clinical, theoretical and anecdotal material makes for an interesting read from a gifted theoretician and clinician.

Otto Kernberg (USA) opens our second section of the book with a comprehensive paper on socially sanctioned violence from a psychodynamic viewpoint. Today we note a major increase in violence and terror, and Kernberg feels that society sanctions the use of violence. His paper reviews psychodynamic group psychology, ideological beliefs in violence and terror, and the effects of the mass media, and ends with an investigation into fundamentalism with its narcissistic and paranoid parts. Ending on an optimistic note, Kernberg writes: ‘In so far as psychological
factors, however, influence conflicts and violence both at individual, group, and national levels, and provide understanding for the structural analyses of ideological systems as well as leadership, hopefully, they will become part of our social armamentarium to reduce, if not eliminate, the terrible problem of violence in our human reality."

The jump from society-as-a-whole to political process is a short one. Josef Shaked (Austria) muses about the way the large group reflects political processes. He brings examples from large groups in Austria, the Ukraine and Israel, describing how political events and processes such as the end of the Cold War, German—Jewish memories of the Holocaust, and the Israeli—Arab conflict impact upon what is going on in the large group and are reflected in it. The large group becomes a remarkable transcultural meeting, where confrontation with the stranger offers an understanding of the stranger within us.

Joseph Triest's (Israel) chapter returns us to the old debate between Le Bon and McDougall about the differentiation between the mob and the organization. His original conclusion is that 'an organization traps the "group spirit," like a genie in a bottle, and by so doing in fact preserves an eternal tension.' The meaning here is that the dialogue between order and chaos continues even when the large group is apparently tamed into being part of the organizational setting. Nonetheless, 'the large group will always threaten the setting imposed upon it by the organization.' Triest's training as both psychoanalyst and organizational consultant pairs the theoretical and clinical in an interesting and unique way.

Many of the original early experiences with large groups took place in institutional settings. Rolf Schmidts (Germany) describes in detail in-patient large group meetings at the Clinic Menterschwaige in Munich, Germany. He addresses technical questions such as the large group's venue and seating arrangements, the director's tasks, subgrouping and absences of staff members. His chapter clarifies how an in-patient large group develops a therapeutic culture. A fascinating treatment of a complex subject.

Haim Weinberg (Israel) introduces us to the new, innovative world of the large group in cyberspace. He compares the large group attributes in face-to-face settings to those in the virtual environment. It is surprising to find many similar features in both environments. Expressions of alienation, aggression, being lost in the crowd and losing one's voice appear also on
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the Internet. What is quite different is the strong tendency for idealization of the group leader on the Internet. Weinberg coins a new term, 'the Internet unconscious' which is related to the social unconscious.

Thor Kristian Island (Norway) focuses on a different setting in describing the large group experience in a group analytic training program in Norway. This context of the large group is seldom written about. One of its important aspects is the integrating function as the training community city square. This unique setting implies that the large group is led by a team of conductors, and raises questions about collective leadership. It seems that group-analytic candidates attribute much of their personal and professional development to the large group, and this paper offers us some insight as to why it is so important in the training program.

Our book ends with an epilogue written by Pat de Maré (UK) and Roberto SCHÖLLBERGER (Italy). In this final chapter de Maré and Schöllberger muse philosophically about the Larger Group as a meeting of minds – a fitting conclusion by one of the more original thinkers in group analysis and the median group, Pat de Maré.

References


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