



The Group As An Object Of Desire: Exploring Sexuality in Group Therapy

Morris Nitsun

Lecture Notes

CHAPTER 11 – THE GROUP AS WITNESS

The group has an important social function in recognizing intimacy and a depth of connection as it unfolds, and that this distinguishes group therapy from individual therapy, in which there is an absence of a witness.

At times, in the intimacy of a dyadic exchange, it is the lack of a social witness, of support, or of constructive interference, that renders one or both parties vulnerable to misunderstanding, hurt or injury.

What happens in a therapy group when intimacy is expressed in a shared space, in the presence of others?

- *The group functions as an observing and reflecting presence, which provides a constructive and potentially reconstructive developmental and social process.*

The group as an 'active witness' can provide some crucial functions for healing:

- *As a receptive holding container for vulnerable sharing about one's self.*
- *As a benign authority that can listen and provide support, but not ignore the seriousness or the ramifications of one's trouble or issue.*
- *By supporting growing connections and bonds developing between members.*

Therapeutic processes can take place through a group's resonance and mirroring of an individual's self-revealing, and at times by the group offering interpretations of understanding of someone's words or behaviors in the immediacy of a here and now interaction in the group.



The Failure to Witness

Groups can fail to anticipate an intimate or direct encounter that needs to happen, or to witness and deal with the negative consequences of a failed encounter or interaction.

In these cases, there is no learning taking place in the group for either of the individuals involved in the interaction, or for the group as a whole.

When a group fails at its task of bearing witness, there will be a deadness or a heavy sadness in the field, about an opportunity lost.

Hidden, unexplored factors in a group that can contribute to the unsuccessful witnessing and handling of a difficult encounter include:

- *The impact of an encounter that happens at an early stage of a group's development so that it is not yet able to address and process issues concerning desire, intimacy and closeness.*
- *Boundary tensions and group norms concerning intimate relationships.*

The operation of power and inclusion-exclusion processes are intrinsic to social functioning. These processes are deeply embedded in all relationships, including sexuality. When a group can address these issues openly and courageously, the group can serve more as a constructive witness and less as a silent bystander.

The group provides a major function of witnessing whenever a group member is re-enacting a potentially hurtful or destructive interaction, or whenever a group member is entering into new psychological or emotional territory.



Immediacy & Intensity

There is a degree of immediacy possible in a group setting, particularly around highly charged or highly threatening interactions or revelations, particularly when they are potentially hurtful and transformational, that is unlikely to happen in many dyadic encounters.

There is a difference between the discussion of fantasy and its direct communication in an interpersonal encounter.

In individual therapy, there by definition no social witness, no auxiliary group which can provide the valuable functions of *observation, reflection, and representations of considered and constructive perspectives* on what transpires between two people.

The group as witness can provide a *normalizing function* to a group member, by helping him or her to come out of their shell of secrecy and share their deepest desires.

The group can also witness an attack from one group member to another, which may be an enactment of either the person's greatest desires or fears. By supporting both of the group members in the here and now, a reconstructive experience becomes possible in a way that could not likely happen so immediately, one to one.

There is a difference between discussing a fantasy and having it directly communicated between two group members in an interpersonal encounter.

The group can provide the valuable functions of observation, reflection and representation of a considered and constructive way of processing the encounter, that is not possible in a dyad.



In Summary

Groups have a capacity which is unique in therapeutic processes – an observing function which has the potential to adopt a more tolerant view of behaviors that are commonly marginalized and pathologized by society.

Although ordinary social constraints often provide the necessary, if not essential, deterrents to transgressive behavior, they can also be prejudicial and internalized by individuals in repressive and self-destructive ways.

Groups can help people to speak 'with the authority of the individual's own experience' rather than from one's parental or ancestral authority.

- *The group is able to offer an observing function in a way which facilitates the individual's own authority through the provision of an alternative social authority.*

This is especially relevant to sexuality, which so readily evokes moral judgments.