

# Theoretical and clinical challenges with applied group analysis

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Dear colleagues,

Let's start with a rhetorical question: What is group analysis good for?

Research suggests that individual and group psychotherapy are equally effective for most mental health disorders.

As a researcher, an individual and group analyst, a trainer in MBT and GA, I will say that individual psychotherapy is to prefer for PTSD, acute symptom disorders and actual conflicts, while **group analysis is to prefer for personality development** (sometimes one needs both). I would add that more chronic symptom disorders like e.g. recurrent depressions, dysthymia, bipolar II, anxiety disorders, problems attributed to ADHD, etc., **most often persist due to personality dysfunctions**. However, personality integration and development require high quality groups with competent therapists that know how to handle personality problems over the full scale, from minor personality problems to severe personality disorders.

When composing therapeutic groups, it is of utmost importance to have in mind the modern conceptualization of personality as a **dimensional variable** with respect to severity and in addition assess the participants for personality trait profiles. The optimal composition is high levels of personality functioning and diversity of personality profiles. It is proven empirically that the higher level of average functioning among the members, the greater the average benefit of group treatment (Piper et al., 2007).

However, clinical realities are not always optimal. Often, as in public mental health sectors, therapists are not in full control of the boundary conditions. They must accept time limitations and clients with dubious motivation, poor personality functioning and propensities for acting out. In short, group analysis has to be adapted to current clinical circumstances. What are the clinical and theoretical challenges therein?

I have discussed these challenges in my book **"Group Analysis. A Modern Synthesis"** which is published these days (Routledge). Here I claim that the generation after Foulkes went too long in an object-relational direction, and I call for a revival of Foulkes slogan about group analysis as **"ego-training in action"**. However, in our era, after the death of the EGO, it has to be reformulated, as Dennis Brown did, as **"self development through subjective interaction"**. Malcolm Pines and Dennis Brown called for a reorientation of group analysis towards **self psychology** by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century, but they failed in their endeavors. Instead, what we witnessed around the turn of the century was a stronger influence by Kleinian and Bionian viewpoints upon group analytic theory, culminating by the **theory of the anti-group** by Morris Nitsun. The group came to be regarded predominantly from the perspective as an object and **the group as object** was looked upon as a repository for destructive forces, contrasting what was now regarded as Foulkes' "naive belief " in the goodness of the group.

This mode of reasoning has in my opinion gone too far. Foulkesian theory should be developed in another direction which restore prosociality in the heart of the group and the **essence of the group, not as an object, but as we-ness**, which means our concerted efforts in realizing a common project that unites us, which provides us with identity and proudness. Moreover, which is of outmost importance, which can provide convincing arguments for group analysis as a solution to the modern challenges of individualistic lifestyles and claim for authenticity which carry risks for superficial narcissism on the one side and social defeat and loneliness on the other. The most important modern dilemma in Western culture is this: **How can the claim for living one's life in an authentic manner, according to the needs of the self, be reconciled with a concern for the Other and the needs of the community of which we are a part.** As clinicians, we might respond that this dilemma is a luxurious one. Many of our clients do not manage to live with others at all, let alone in an authentic manner, but as we shall see, the problematics of the self does not disappear by that, to the contrary, it makes the restoration of the self even more urgent and thereby the need of being member of a group that accepts and supports the vulnerable person while at the same time explores the vicissitudes of being part of a living and vulnerable group.

The more **vulnerable** the individual members, the more vulnerable the group as a whole. An important lesson from modern psychology is that most psychological phenomena are dimensional. There are no such things as good or bad objects, or even secure or insecure attachment. We exist in dimensions. We are more or less vulnerable, and **groups are more or less analytic if we by analytic mean being able to reflect collectively by free floating discussions on the emotional resonance which the topics of the group set in motion.** It is not obvious that therapeutic groups will reach a high level of analytic group discourse. It's a matter of group development and it depends on the boundary conditions, above all the level of personality functioning of the members and the ambitions, ideals and competence of the group analyst.

The more vulnerable the individual members, the more vulnerable the group as a whole and the more important is the role of the conductor. Group analytic discourse might be an ideal in the mind of the conductor, but this ideal is often far from clinical realities

where group members might be distant, dependent, passive and distrustful. **So, how do we promote group development?** By following Foulkes slogan “trust the group”? I would say yes and no. You should not trust the group if the group in fact is almost nonexistent. Then you should **create a group**. The fact that 9 people meet in a room, isn’t in itself a sign of group cohesion. The modern way of creating groups is certainly more pedagogic than in older days. The practice of psychoanalysis and group analysis in older days was almost bizarre from a contemporary point of view, with the analyst being in a strange kind of dialogue with the clients, by nonresponding, or responding by silence or by interpretations. The contemporary ideal of the group analyst is a person who is present not in a detached way, but by being kind, respectful, caring, verbally responsive and **pedagogic with respect to what group analysis is all about**. Group analysis is about personality development of the individual through group interaction and collective reflection. In particular it concerns **emotional consciousness** since what we label **symptoms are unmentalized emotions**. That’s why therapeutic groups first and foremost should deal with emotional awareness, understanding of emotions, emotion regulation and finding appropriate ways of expressing emotions. The next headline is attachment. Group analysis should promote **more secure attachment patterns**, which are more appropriate attachment behaviors and better capacities for empathy and intimacy. And group analysis should **enhance mentalizing abilities**, which are less psychic equivalence thinking, or black-and-white thinking, particularly when emotionally aroused, more humble curiosity and abilities to self-reflect by the resources of wisdom which are available in society. When these developments occur concomitant with the individual’s growth in **narrative identity**, it will be experienced as **strengthening the self, i.e. the person becoming more authentic and able to live a richer and less painful life**.

**A pedagogic stance** implies, in my opinion, that these goals should be explained to clients and to the group. Not necessarily in one package, but along the course. In older days analysts learned that they should not express their own preferences to clients, in order not to stimulate subjugation and unconscious wishes for admiration by satisfying the needs of the analyst. By and large, such fears are unwarranted. In our times, **group analysts should openly acclaim when the individual and the group is doing a good job**. Thereby, the values and norms that constitute the group self is strengthened. Towards the end of a meeting, the analyst might say something like **“I think the group has done a great job tonight. We’ve dealt with painful and difficult emotions, which is what we should do in this group, that’s why we are here, and I have been impressed by the direct and honest way it has been done, that all of you have participated and contributed to a diversity of perspectives on very complex matters, not in an abstract**

**but highly personal ways. This is promising for the group for the future, and it strikes me how far we have reached compared with the more restricted and defensive conversation that took place when the group was in its infancy”.**

In particular, the group analyst should acclaim the group when it succeeds in working through insults and conflicts in the here and now. Today, most psychotherapies acknowledge the importance of addressing alliance ruptures as they occur in the therapeutic process, through a work on **rupture and repair**. This tradition originated with the work of Heinz Kohut and his concept of **selfobject failures** as crucial phenomena in the therapeutic process. In groups selfobject failures occur not so much between the patients and the therapist, as between members themselves. As we know, life in groups will inevitably include more or less subtle **insults and/or attacks, misunderstandings, disappointments, neglect, opposition, envy, and the like**. Such events are fuel for the therapeutic mill and should be addressed whenever they occur. The ability to identify such events, to verbalize, explore, understand the personal and contextual roots, acknowledge the emotions involved, take responsibility for own thoughts and actions, counteract victim positions and promote honest reconciliation, is a hallmark of group analytic culture/discourse. **Such a discourse doesn't come by itself. It is not a piece of nature, it's the hallmark of civilization**. Foulkes went far to indicate that such a discourse would develop naturally, because of the group participants being members of the same society and together representing the social norms which they individually deviated from. Therefore, it was a matter of trusting the group. However, everyday social discourse is not particularly suited for addressing insults and rejection and clinical realities tell other stories than what Foulkes advocated. Group members frequently drop out and groups become stuck in their development if adverse experiences are not properly worked through. However, **groups can learn to do this job and they learn it through the work of the therapist**. They learn it when they witness how the therapist addresses insults and disappointments, his attitudes, how he explores, his way of understanding layers of emotions and defenses, and above all the most pervasive personality trait that try to cover selfobject failures which is that of avoidance and how avoidance in a group tend to create new avoidance. Group members will try to **imitate the therapist**, that's the road to what we denote as internalization, and by imitating his/her ways of understanding and exploring and relating, group members will experience more constructive ways of understanding, exploring and relating and these modes will slowly become modes shared by several and thus become a "natural" part of the discourse, or the culture or matrix, and **increasingly the analyst can "leave it to the group"**.

The lower level of average personality functioning in the group, the more fear, anger, separation anxiety, shame and unconscious guilt. When the personality profiles are more in the borderline range, intense **narcissistic rage** may surface in the group. As a thumb rule, rage explosions are destructive and should be stopped before too much damage is done. The therapist should take over as the leader of the group and the course of events depends upon how the therapist has constructed his/her authority. When his/her authority has been properly constructed in the group, it should not be necessary to shout to get furious protagonists to shut down. From then on, the therapist should take a firm lead in exploring the roots and triggering of the rupture.

With low level of personality functioning, the group alone might not be enough. The appropriate action is seldom to add more group sessions, like twice a week group analysis. **One should be pragmatic about additional components**, if individual psychotherapy should be added, if couple or family therapy should be added, if substance abuse should be focused more specifically or cooperation with social and work agencies should be intensified. However, one should not forget in such cases that the group is the main vehicle for personality growth and individual psychotherapy should be regarded as a device to help the patient to learn from his/her group experience and should be terminated when level of functioning improves.

I have underlined the importance of addressing selfobject failures in the group. However, these instances should not cover the fact that the opposite is the rule in good functioning groups, which is that **the group as a whole and the group members perform a range of positive selfobject functions towards each other**. Group members support each other, care for each other, console each other, respect each other, serve as ideals for each other, admire each other, feels deeply understood by each other, minds one other, and the like. Such acts strengthen the self. But groups work also by sheer **otherness**. The self needs selfobject experiences in order to thrive, but it also needs encounters with otherness. In order to develop it needs to encounter different perspectives, other ways of thinking about man, the world and interpersonal transactions and it needs to be confronted with aspects of own self which is repressed or denied.

Here I should remind you that the best road to hidden aspects of the self is still through dreams. Group members may of course point to aspects of our selves which we strive to cover up, but such attempts will often be dismissed because they are perceived as hostile or intrusive or outright false speculations. However, we cannot deny authorship to our dreams. They are definitively created by ourselves and they might reveal to us aspects of ourselves that we perceive as strange or outright **alien**. Psychotherapy is to a large extent an effort to open a **new kind of dialogue with alien parts of oneself and**

**otherness.** Dreams are excellent devices for this purpose. I would claim that groups devoid of dreams are missing something quite essential, they are like lukewarm champagne. I cannot here discuss the techniques of working with dreams in group analysis but want to underline that also here it is a matter of educating the group. It has to learn how to work with dreams. And when it has learned it, the group will by itself produce a stream of dreams. Let me present some examples:

**Guttorm, a 45-year-old dentist,** was a test of patience in the group. He repeatedly devalued the therapist, the whole group as well as group analysis as a kind of treatment. He came up with all sorts of "tricks" to tilt the therapist out of his role. On one such occasion, he got up in the group and screamed. His associations went to the kindergarten where he was full of envy for the other children and where he did the strangest things to attract the attention of the kindergarten aunts. In the group, the therapist was accused for all that he did not do.

After a year, things changed with the following dream:

*"I am a passenger in a large and almost lavishly decorated aircraft. Suddenly, I discover that the plane is without a pilot. What should I do? I couldn't fly and I didn't understand the lever and instrument panel. But there was no way around it. I had to take charge and eventually managed to get the plane down to the ground."*

Guttorm and the other group members immediately associated the dream with his main theme in the group: that he wanted the therapist to steer his life. Eventually Guttorm started to talk about starting to take reefs in his sails. He had tried and often succeeded in forcing people earlier in his life, but with the therapist and the group he had not succeeded. And maybe that was a good thing. Perhaps it was time to grab the levers himself.

Also in the next example, a **dream provides necessary metaphors** for discussing what is going on in the group:

In the second meeting after an intake of two new members, several of the old members express different kinds of frustration. **Helge reports the following dream:**

*"I'm on a train. My suitcase (left over from my mother) is open on the floor of the cabin with lots of its contents strewn about. I try to cram it back again but there is not enough space. It's like it's more than what I originally brought with me. It's very annoying and I don't get off the train where I'm supposed to."*

Signe immediately says, "It was a great picture of being saddled with other people's problems." The therapist comments: "Yes, it might be frustrating with new members in groups. It tends to be a bit of chaos and mess at first."

One goal of group analysis is to modify one's **narrative identity**. Here comes a dream which contributes to this process:

In the group analysis with **Viktor (36)**, some antisocial traits were gradually revealed. Not of the worst kind, but a lot of snooping and "shortcuts". In the group, he exerted significant pressure on the therapist to get him to write a certificate for an extended rehabilitation benefit. The following dream revealed new perspectives on his antisociality:

*"I dreamed of a rather pompous event in my hometown, either a theater or circus, with many celebrities in attendance. I went with a childhood friend. On the way in, we passed a great racing bike. I got a thought of stealing it but didn't. We went backstage and were unexpectedly well received. I looked through a hole in the curtain out in the hall at all the celebrities."*

Viktor's own associations were about feelings of inferiority while growing up, of the longing to be socially accepted, approved, and to belong, but at the same time the conviction that he would "never be one of them," i.e., the socially and intellectually successful. However, it was surprising that he was so well received in the dream. One group member says that it may not be just about growing up in childhood, but about the group as well, to be accepted here. The therapist adds: "Yes, and that this acceptance makes it possible to take a new look at celebrities. Perhaps also that this acceptance makes it unnecessary to steal racing bikes." The group embarked on a long discussion about needs, about supplying themselves, about stealing, about belonging, about self-esteem and justice.

In this lecture I've argued for group analytic psychotherapy as a flexible approach which can be adapted to a wide range of boundary conditions. However, this flexibility also demands a complex theory which is up to date on modern conceptualizations of the major components of personality, levels of personality functioning and the needs of the vulnerable self as it tries to settle in a living dynamic group. And it demands a theory of the group as self, as this living entity that wants something and strives for something as a collective. I am in full agreement with Heinz Kohut who suggested that **a concept of the group self is necessary to understand the individual self, and vice versa**. Space does not allow me to expand on this matter here. It might be on a later occasion. To the interested listener I will recommend my recent book on **Modern Group Analysis**. However, I would like to underline **the fundamental difference between the psychoanalytic concepts of "objects" and "selfobjects"**. In traditional object-relations

thinking, objects is something, or someone, which you orient your drive interests towards. Selfobjects, however, is something more diffuse, it cannot be identified with a concrete object in a physical sense, and it refers to **the significance others have to you as sources of vitality and wellbeing**. Others may be important as sources of recognition. We all need to be recognized as valuable members of a collective, being it the family, the neighborhood, the club, the school, at work, as citizens or as members of the nation. We need others as ideals, as sources of knowledge and wisdom, as someone who represents the fruits of our civilization. And we need others who are similar to ourselves, who thinks and feels and acts like ourselves. We tend to imitate our ideals and our perceived twins.

Let me close with some remarks about group analysis and politics. To me group analysis is first and foremost a clinical discipline. It's not about **general politics**. The only general political implication in my opinion is a concern for free speech, or free and open communication. Group analysis is about combating inhibitions of free and open communication in the mind and between persons in the here and now. It should be concerned about general politics only if there are forces in society that make people fear free and open communication in groups, e.g. if group members don't feel free to express themselves for fear of punishment as in certain authoritarian states. However, I cannot see how it qualifies by being a group analyst to have certain opinions about immigration, refugee politics, the war in Gaza, market liberalism, gender discrimination, etc. **As responsible citizens of democratic societies, we should engage in such matters, but not because we are group analysts.**

What I would like is rather more engagement by group analysts in social marketing of group analysis as a clinical tool for our time. I miss promotion of group analysis in the media, that group analysts are more engaged and visible in discussion of **health politics**. We dispose of a great clinical tool which is used too little. It should be favored by health authorities, by general practitioners, by teachers, by social workers. However, we cannot expect to be asked for if we are invisible. **Group analysis should make itself more visible**. It should be prouder of itself as a profound source of prosociality and should promote itself with the following assets: 1) Compared to other approaches, it is **cheaper** for the individual client and for the society as a whole, 2) it provides the client with **enough time** to undergo profound change, 3) the format is **ecologically valid** for self and personality development, concern for others and engagement in collective discourse. These are strong arguments which we should promote more forcefully.

I will particularly emphasize **ecological validity**. It means that the format of the treatment is valid for the real-life manifestations of the problems. In group analysis, the



problems are played out in the here-and-now, as in the way of behaving, the way of relating, the way of displaying or hiding emotions, the way of reflecting, the way of commitment and engagement, the way of dealing with intimacy and closeness, the way of playing, the way of cooperating with others, the way of dealing with authorities, etc. This is **highly valid for real life**. Group analysis is not repetitious intellectual discussions, it is **learning by doing** and reflecting simultaneously. It's being-with others in a profound **embodied** way.

At least in the Nordic countries there are heated discussions about the rising mental distress among young people. In Norway one third (!) of the students report that they fulfill criteria for a mental disorder, mainly depression, anxiety disorders and substance abuse. The American psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2024) convincingly argues that the main reasons for this sad state of affairs are 1) a style of upbringing that shields children from rough and tumble play, e.g. being too protected by anxious parents, and 2) suffering the negative consequences of living their life through iPhones and social media.

The social media life is the opposite of group analysis: It's distant and non-committed, you can break off when it doesn't suit you, there is no obligation for others, you can scroll to another page, it's not embodied, you can choose your own imagined echo-chamber which gives you a temporary (but not grounded) identification, you become hooked by people who will exploit you for their own purposes, you are overwhelmed by information, nobody really gets to know you and you do not learn about yourself, you end up in a profound **pseudomentalizing way of being**, where words and opinions and fake news are fleeting around, but not being really judged by a grounded self, because that self does not know its own values. The person becomes confused and plagued by fear and separation distress.