

THE FUTURE FOR WHICH GROUP?

An address given by Gaie Houston at the GAUK conference, September 1999

The intention in this article is to raise awareness of the ways we perhaps need more education about our responses to different group configurations. Only with that understanding are we likely to gain a political skill that is one of the significant missing elements in the world at the moment. Insight and new behaviours at organisational, at inter-group, national and international levels may be needed if we are to survive as a species, or even as a planet.

Heteromorphy is the word used by biologists to mean, having many and diverse forms. More than we perhaps notice, humans have remarkably different forms or modes at different moments. We are heteromorphic. As I have said, we are all members of many groups, all the time. This fact of life is under stressed in individualistic societies such as many in Europe and the developed world. We influence and are influenced by all these groups. Which membership, which belonging we hold in awareness or give value to at any moment has profound social and political consequences.

In recent decades we have begun to register ourselves as members of, not just the human, not just the mammal, not just the animal group, but in some way members of the planet. This planet, Earth, is recognisably one entity; yet it is also the most complex large

group system we experience very directly.

Moving to the next levels of magnitude is easier to do in words than in imagination. We can only guess at the molecule or quark status of our planet in some large group beyond any scale we comprehend. It is perhaps easier to come back to earth and look at the

EVOLUTION OF GROUP AWARENESS IN ONE PERSON

One of my favourite quotations is from Otto Rank: *the self is forged in interaction*. I hear too Lee McLeod's *contact precedes self* Another fragment of memory comes to me as I begin this section, in the visual images still in my mind of a television programme seen long ago, of some research carried out, most cruelly, it can be said, on young chimpanzees. The babies were kept from their mother for varying periods, from different points in their short lives, though some of them were allowed to see their mothers, again for varying periods, at a distance, out of touch, in another cage. One group had no caring contact at all beyond being given food and drink and having their cage cleaned. After a time they became a snarling delinquent gang whose members only ever showed hostile responses to each other. They were somehow reminiscent of the jeering groups of young humans who surface as football hooligans, or in whatever setting gives an opportunity for their programmed destructive responses to show.

When autopsies were carried out on these completely anti-social animals, a withering of the same part of the brain was seen in every case. The behavioural had become structural, and in all probability, irreversible. There are horrendous implications in these discoveries. But there is also plenty of evidence that humans have remarkable resources to combat and even reverse brain damage, so I am not suggesting that people showing anti-social personality disorder are a lost cause. I am wanting to stress once more what we all see the evidence of: the profound organismic effect that socialising processes, and specially warm nurturing, have on us all in the first years of life.

THE PAIR

The baby-mother or baby-carer pair is the first, and a profoundly influential beginning of dealings with the world, indeed, of becoming part of the social world. The pair is one of the building blocks of society [Simmel 1950]. Much of John Bowlby's work on attachment can be seen as a description of strong supportive pairings that he suggests are needed in every life, from its beginning to its end.

The new baby is in intense contactful relationship with the breast or bottle-bearing other. From this stems part-object theory, Melanie Klein's description of the polarities of infant perception. Wilfred Bion built on her work to make connections between her theories about the infant, and his observations of what looked like a recapitulation of a version

of some of these early experiences in group formation in later life. I shall return to this theme as I go along.

At best this first pairing is, at least at times, very rewarding to both members. You may indeed recall people who seem not to want to move beyond this first configuration. Some of them find a co-habitee in later life, who is their only significant companion. Adjusting to the presence of children of their own may prove very difficult for them, if they never really made that gear shift for themselves in their own infancy. That shift must be perilous or frightening for many babies. If the primary pairing feels safe, maybe that feels like good reason for not letting go of it. If it feels rocky, that may be yet more reason to hang on in there in Anxious Attachment.

PAIR OR TRIAD?

But in a majority of families there is another grown-up, probably the father. He too is in a pair with the mother, and may have his own difficulties in allowing in the new family member. This tiny trio are potentially four groups: three pairs and one threesome. The dilemma presented by the conflicting memberships of these is the central theme of much psychodynamic theory. Can the baby tolerate being an outsider to the parental pair? Can either mother or father tolerate an extra member to their relationship?

EVOLUTION OF GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Returning to the young child learning the world, I am grateful

to the painstaking research of Daniel Stern [1985]. I see the applicability of his theory to group development. He sees the first stage as what he calls Emergent Organisation, or Emergent Self, during which the baby plays or struggles with creating the possibilities of there being, in Gestalt terms, fields in which there is meaning. From the inchoate and overwhelming data around, selection and preference and grasp and organisation are experienced, as a process.

Then comes the Core Self, which is established through the baby's getting hold of a notion of its own history, an order or organisation about what has happened. It gains too a sense of self-agency, that it can make things happen, get a foot to move, or turn its head or whatever, when it wants to. At the same time, it is probably acquiring what he calls self-affectivity, a linkage between feeling and behaviour that makes sense.

Without being too fanciful, some analogies can be seen with small-group development, as members of a group struggle for a sense of what happens here, what has happened here, what is allowed here, what feels safe here, what is this group as opposed to the out-group, and so on.

Then Stern talks about the Subjective Self, who grapples both with having a mind of her own, and recognising that there are other minds out there to interact with. Individuals commonly make out a little better than many small groups at this stage. Many small

groups seem to stay contentedly, or even to be designed to stay, at the Core Self or Internal Maintenance stage, rather than move to Inter-Group fluency. It may not be too fanciful to say that as groups increase in size, so they display the Stern stages in more florid, even pantomimic, style. The various groups within a training organisation are likely to have some caginess about each other at early meetings. The training institutes themselves are likely to be wary and even antagonistic in ways which I doubt are all to do with commercial competition or other rational factors, though reason will usually be dragged in as camouflage for the suspicious feelings experienced by people who are construing themselves at any moment as members of the training institutes, rather than, say, members of the Gestalt sorority or the humanistic movement or some other overarching group to which they all have allegiance.

Theory tells us that when two groups are doing roughly analogous tasks, just out of communication with each other, then hostility will result [Bradford 1978]. In Stern's terms, this might be seen as a retreat to the Core Self in both groups, rather than a confident move to the next evolutionary stage.

The final stage of infant development Stern describes as the development of the Narrative Self, which happens when the baby can talk, and thus communicate with greater subtlety. In some ways experience is wonderfully enriched by this; but words can

lie, and so deception can also enter, to confuse.

In a group, words are of course there from the first, and may indeed confuse as well as illuminate what is going on at less aware levels.

COMMUNITAS

One such phenomenon is what the sociologists call *Communitas*: the high that is experienced by members of many different sizes of group at different times. It is not named in much psychological theory of groups, though I see it as one of the most valuable and the most potentially dangerous phenomena in direct group experience. The lack of a word shows lack of recognition or valuing. To my mind it is the very lack of a word here which is confusing, when most group members who reflect about process do so in words.

Communitas has a great overlap with the in-love or in-lust feeling that occurs in pairs of humans. It often includes vividness of gestalt formation, a tendency to joyfulness, heightened sexuality, great charity of feeling towards more people than the beloved, and a tendency to strive to be worthy of the other in whatever way is available. Plato's army of pairs of lovers stressed this aspect of the in-love feeling.

Blind Cupid reminds us of another aspect, the wilful idealisation of the beloved and refusal to acknowledge the implications of behaviour and sentiments that the onlooker knows are generally abhorrent to the beguiled partner.

CONVERSION EXPERIENCE

The open state of being which is most conducive to speedy learning seems to be triggered in *communitas* or in-loveness. Love is in the ascendant, fear is on the ebb, and patterns of intelligence, making sense and assimilating, appear to function with the ease of a healthy hungry digestive tract.

Whether awarery or unawarery, this characteristic of group life is exploited, as far as I can judge, by some kinds of religious meetings, by T-Groups and therapy groups, by EST and Landmark and many more overtly emotional, spiritual or psychological groups of different sizes. There are those who say that they do their best in leading groups not to let the high feeling occur. What a swizz. It is part of the bonding, part of the life of the individual and the group. To eschew it is a bit like saying you will have a big party with no singing or dancing. In many circumstances these are a function of partying, as *communitas* is of group life, [and of party life at best].

The Nuremberg Rallies are a reminder in this century of mass feeling, of a high which appeared to suppress reason in favour of blind allegiance, in a way which had immense destructiveness in it. Demos and riots of lesser proportions all suggest that there is an almost mathematical relation between numbers, field conditions and *communitas*.

I would hope that by the end of today there is some of that sense of re-affirmation, inspiration, affection,

excitement, that are some of the good aspects of the thing, even though only a few hours have been spent together.

In a small group I predict that up to a week is needed for strong *communitas* to be likely. In a large crowd, it can happen in minutes. And here is the centre of what I am getting at. Most of us are not very experienced at managing ourselves in large groups where the behaviours have not been rehearsed. Most of us can do theatre-audience, football spectator, Tube-traveller at rush-hour. These are a few randomly chosen large group activities where we know by and large what is expected, and where a moment's imagining will convince you that the behaviours are likely to be strikingly different. But the rush of feeling that can change a crowd into a lynch mob is less likely to have been experienced in homeopathic doses by very many people here.

Unless we get to know our potential to be transformed for good or evil by the size and kind of group we are in, we are at risk. On the one hand we risk losing a powerful aid to Perls' "excitement and growth in the human personality". On the other we risk becoming what can be called mindless, or in Gestalt language, out of response-ability, the tool of whoever and whatever is intent on manipulating us. If as you read this you are telling yourself that you yourself are one of those people who manages not to be overcome.... No. Tribal responses were built into us all long before we got so fancy in our Narrative Selves.

One appropriate task I see for the next century is to work at educational initiatives which encourage people to know their talents and difficulties in operating in different-sized groups, and to develop their skills in this field in which we all operate constantly, whatever denials we invent.

CONCLUSION

Many theorists see the analogies between individual human development, and group development. Indeed it would be surprising if there were not vast overlaps between the two. Stern's schema is one ready-made way of registering some of what happens in groups. Bion's [1961] Basic Assumptions are another great illumination of some levels of small group development or stuckness. Schutz gives a much simpler index of group activities, with an emphasis on health rather than pathology.

Some of these theories seem mutually contradictory. What the purists overlook is that people are contradictory, and operate by opposites and inconsistencies of belief and reasoning, as well as by consistency. What is important is to have a few measuring instruments when you study a group, or yourself in a group. People seem to need these, rather than being able for ever to be at the stage of Emergent Self, and launch without preconception into every new experience.

Gaie Houston, 1999

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