

REFLECTIONS ON A GROUP THERAPY SESSION

RUNNING HEAD: Group Therapy

ABSTRACT

This essay is a reflection on my experience with the group therapy process with emphasis on one particular session. Although group therapy may have some value in educating the social attitude, I find that authentic experience and individuality is generally repressed, rendering the meetings boring and unfulfilling. This, at least, is my experience with cognitive oriented groups. Based on my reflections, however, I eventually conclude that there may be the possibility of a group therapy that is more authentic, which taps into a deeper level of the psyche and which allows for the expression of archetypal energy, both positive and negative. At the very least, this would help individuals identify and reflect upon certain projections and, possibly, for the group to "clear the air." Without a ritual container which allows for the expression of such archetypal energy, however, this could be chaotic and destructive, especially to the more vulnerable members of the group.

Introduction

This essay is about a group therapy session that I experienced as a participant. To begin with, allow me to confess that I am not personally a fan of group forms of therapy. My experience with it, albeit not a lot, has been of virtually no value to me personally. I have always found that such groups suppress genuine individuality, as in one way or another there is a tendency towards "group-think" or, as Jung observes, a lowering of consciousness. Indeed, my experience supports Jung's (as reported in Adler, 1975) observations that there is generally a lowering of individual conscious awareness and an atmosphere of suggestibility in groups. Marie Louise von Franz (1993) echoes Jung adding that not only is there a group suggestive spirit but the individual sense of responsibility decreases along with a "decrease of mental and ethical independence of the individual (p.291)." There is also inevitably a considerable amount of narcissistic self-reflection. Her reflections lead her to the conclusion that "group experience should never be compulsive" and that for those who need to learn about social adaptation "participating in freely formed (un-analytical) social groups" is a sufficient place of learning (p.291).

The Group Experience

This experience was no exception. Even the rules that the group agreed upon at the beginning supported these tendencies. I hasten to add that I can appreciate the need for such rules, as groups can easily degenerate into primitive

Group Therapy

explosions, attacks and counterattacks. Moreover, such a need highlights the collective nature of groups and their potential value for educating people's social attitudes, which Jung feels is, in fact, their only therapeutic role.

However, should one wish for a deeper experience, a more meaningful one for both the individual and the group as a whole, I believe such an approach to group therapy, with its cognitive orientation and rules, is deficient. In my opinion, for a meaningful group experience, there is a need to go beyond a strictly cognitive approach to allow for a wider and deeper expression of both light and dark archetypal energies. In such a way, the group as a whole can profit with the shared experience while individuals may find containment and release through sympathetic identification and resonance. This could result in a certain "clearing of the air" for the group and for the reflective individual an opportunity to identify certain projections and to potentially deal with them. Although there is always a risk that group dynamics will degenerate into meaningless chaos, the possibility of, in fact, experiencing the deeper archetypal psyche through the group experience needs to be examined. Perhaps, in this regard, we can learn from primal cultures, e.g. Native North Americans, with their ritual healing ceremonies and dance, which seems to allow for this kind of therapeutic group experience.

Failing the ability to tap into a deeper stratum of both the individual and the group, one simply feels hostage to the group or some members of the group and their inferior demands. At least this is my experience with groups in general and,

Group Therapy

in particular, this one. The doodles in Exhibit A, which were done during the group session, are indicative of some of the emotions I felt at the time. As depicted in the drawings of the heads, they include scepticism, hostility, boredom and the pull to sink into subjective reverie. The female figure, meanwhile, represents the feeling of utter despair and helplessness at being subjected to this experience. The question is: just what was going on to induce such states of mind?

The session began by one person expressing her feeling that she had difficulty speaking in class and that she found ideas being rattled about in our discussion groups with such rapidity that she couldn't follow them. This was interpreted by several members of the group to mean that they should slow down their delivery. I have a certain amount of empathy for this woman and, it may be that, so frankly stating her case may help her in the future in this group [and elsewhere]. This would be an education of the social attitude.

At the same time, I experienced her complaint as her problem and her need to work through certain narcissistic tendencies and not the group's problem per se. I am not alone in this assessment as others spontaneously expressed a similar sentiment to me personally. To see this situation from another angle, however, I need to consider my projections on her. Based on a few dreams I have had of this woman over the course of my studies, my projections, in fact, suggest that I can profit by paying closer attention to this side of myself, that is to say my self-

Group Therapy

reflective feelings, and allow them to phenomenologically find expression in my written work and life. She was, in fact, a good student and she often showed up in my dreams with top marks. What I experience as narcissism then may in part, at least, be the ability for self-conscious expression of subjective feeling states.

I also recognise that the group-as-a-whole could potentially profit from this woman feeling more included. Moreover, certain members could become more sensitive to her and make adjustments in their social attitudes. Having said this, due to the conscious wishes of members of the class and group rules, there was no attempt to challenge her on her own deficiencies, in my mind, limiting the value of her confession. And even if that had been permitted, her concern was in my opinion, my projections notwithstanding, mainly of a personal and subjective nature which, in itself, did not speak to a deeper strata of either the group psyche or that of other individuals in the class.

A second event, again of a personal and subjective nature, was the way another person, who appeared to bond with the group leaders and identify with the established rules, seemed to me to psychologically elevate herself above the group itself. I also observed that the person to her right did not hold her hand at the end during the group "hand holding ritual." This seemed to be simply an expression of antipathy on the part of the latter individual. These dynamics did not surprise me, knowing what I do about the feelings of certain individuals in the group towards her.

Group Therapy

In fact, to really appreciate what was going on, it is necessary to see the group therapy session as part of a process that has taken place over the entire year. In particular it needs to be understood as being situated after a particularly emotional group session the previous day. Otherwise, it is impossible to either relate to or even understand what was transpiring. Indeed, it was quite apparent that the two group leaders were totally in the dark about these dynamics. As a result, I found many of their observations irrelevant and unrelated, which added to my personal distress and discomfort with the situation. Although their distance from the group may have given them some objectivity, their lack of relatedness with it, in my opinion, rendered the experience superficial and even inauthentic.

For this reason, the event that ended the group session was, for me, by far the most important, the exuberant expression of what I call the "dark god" for want of a better description. Here, I refer the reader to Exhibits B, C and D, my imaginative reflections done after the session, although done as doodles during the week of the group session and on site. Exhibit B, with its Janus-headed figure, suggests a reflective attitude, and an attempt to understand the situation from various angles. The dog in the drawing was stimulated by an actual black dog that strayed into the classroom and that eventually sat and slept at my feet. I took it as a synchronistic event and see it symbolically as representing an instinct that guides one into the unconscious. In other words it suggests that my reflections need to involve a connection to the unconscious and that they are not

Group Therapy

just cerebral. Exhibit C, which is principally a picture of a large fish coming out of the black water, indicates thoughts and reflections emerging from the unconscious, while Exhibit D is an image of, for want of a better description, the "dark god," probably representing a side that was repressed too much during this cognitively oriented group session and which somehow related to what had transpired the previous day. All the gods need to be respected and given their rightful place in life, not just the gods of light but the dark side as well. A cognitive approach to group therapy does not allow for shadow, but represses it through rules and group norms.

At any rate, the last event was totally unplanned and, in my mind, a response to what I experienced as the superficial and repressive nature of the group experience particularly, what seemed to me to be, the maudlin attempts at the end to find closure. I believe it was especially powerful as the person most involved [the man who danced] probably carries the image for many members of the group as being quite conservative and living in his head. As I am that person I know these are misconceptions based on a certain outward appearance and an introverted nature that seem to be little understood by some members of the group. The fact that he was eventually joined by a vivacious younger woman who portrays the opposite kind of image added to the moment.

Based on personal reports, many people found the experience a healthy release. In fact, following from this experience, spontaneous and joyful revelry began that

Group Therapy

were extended into the following evening by a significant proportion of the members of the class. I have certain misgivings about the experience, however, in that the energy represented by the "dark god" has difficulty being adequately contained without individual understanding and/or collective preparedness including some form of ritual containment. Although, from one point of view, it led to a kind of joyful vital expression, from another point of view, it was a regressive experience more adolescent than adult. Indeed, I have been told that one or two people were embarrassed about the event and one member of the group concluded that the episode showed no respect for her spiritual experience. This is the same woman who appeared to bond with the leaders and who generally identifies with "the light".

As a matter of fact there has been a tendency for some members of the class, particularly the women, to scapegoat her. Most of the men either see her as a bit "flaky" or want her to relate to them in a more down to earth fashion. Overall, then, there is a considerable amount of negative projections directed towards this particular individual. On my part, I would prefer her to act more "humanly," but have never felt any conscious desire to change her.

Then, why did I direct the dance at her at the end of the group session? On one level, it has to do with a dream I had that can be amplified with the "Salome-John the Baptist legend" and a related dream that this person had where she identified with John the Baptist and that she has recounted to the group on more than one

Group Therapy

occasion. On another level, there was a feeling that she could receive a helpful message somewhat indirectly. On yet another level, the expression was spontaneous and unconscious, implying that I projected onto her that part of myself that identifies too much with "the light." In fact, the projection and unconscious nature of the expression, along with the woman's vulnerability, highlight the need to find some form of containment for potentially destructive archetypal energies and a way to process projections. It also suggests that participation in such analytical groups should not be made compulsory as von Franz argues.

A Dream Supporting the Value of Group Therapy

Before completing these reflections I feel a need to tie in the group experience with a dream I had two nights prior to the group therapy session, which, in part, seems to be related to this experience. The dream goes as follows:

I am in a class. I receive a letter from a friend of mine, saying that I can't educate people here like the ashram I had stayed at in India. This friend is a businessman. Doug, from the class, comes over and berates me for trying to do just that. I push him into a chair and exclaim: "What the fuck are you doing that for? That's my personal business. How did you get the letter? etc." Jim, another classmate, looking a little distant, says "I am getting wet." I then get up and harangue people, perhaps about the way they should be. Then the teacher, a

Group Therapy

blond curly haired, blue eyed man talks about why people are here. He says it is weird. I cut in exclaiming, "do you know what the word weird means? It means fate, destiny." As I go away, I say to myself, it probably means I will have to leave. I am then with Doug and put my arm around him. I say, "I was only half play-acting or I was only play-acting. I hope you are ok."

Amongst other things, the dream seems to suggest that I am learning a psychology that is not the same as the introverted psycho-spiritual practices I experienced while in India, but which may nonetheless be relevant here in North America and the West. This seems to include the group process. Indeed, I observed that the word "weird" was used on four or five different occasions during the group session, tying it in synchronistically with the dream.

Need for a Ritual Container

Despite my misgivings, then, there seems to be some value to group therapy. A more conscious effort needs to be made to allow personal subjective experiences to be contained in a larger framework that is archetypal and that allows for both collective shadow and light. Working with dreams can help, although the material can be too personal and simply act as a catalyst for narcissistic self-reflection. Attempts to discover the archetypal substratum of dreams expressed by individual members of the group would deepen this experience and make it more relevant to everybody. Attempting to differentiate between archetypal dreams, especially those relevant to the group itself or the

Group Therapy

larger society, what primal people recognise as "big dreams," and those of a more personal nature, would also help.

In addition to working with dreams, finding a genuine ritual container would, I believe, make the experience assessable to all members of the group at an affective and imaginal level in addition to a cognitive one. Without such measures, there may be cognitive insight involving material that is personal to the few people that express it and a few others that for reasons of personal history relate to it. For others in the group, there are feelings of boredom and being held emotionally hostage, a lack of authenticity and suppression of individuality, at best some education of the social attitude. At least that is my experience.

Genuine individuality need not be suppressed should the archetype, including the group shadow, somehow find authentic expression. Some way of containing and/or ritualising the expression of such energies would help in protecting those who might otherwise be vulnerable and too personally affected by the experience. There also needs to be a way to help people to identify and deal with their projections, including those of a negative nature. Jung (as reported in Adler, 1975) concedes the possibility of a form of group therapy that is based on his theoretical model of the psyche. These considerations, I believe, move in that direction. At the same time, I fully agree with his and von Franz concerns

Group Therapy

about group therapy, including the consideration that the analytical group experience should not be made compulsory.

Conclusion

In this essay, I reflect upon my experience with group therapy in general, with special reference to a particular group therapy session. I discuss my general discomfort with group therapy, while accepting the fact that it may have value in educating the social attitude. I finally concede that there may potentially be a deeper value in group therapy but, for that to be the case it needs to somehow allow for the expression of archetypal energy, some of which can be of a disturbing nature. Some form or forms of ritual container can help to give expression to such energy, while protecting vulnerable members of the group. This also includes the need to allow people to identify and process some of their own projections, including those of a negative nature. Jung and von Franz's concerns about analytical groups, however, need to be taken into serious consideration when making preparations for any group experience.

EXHIBIT A

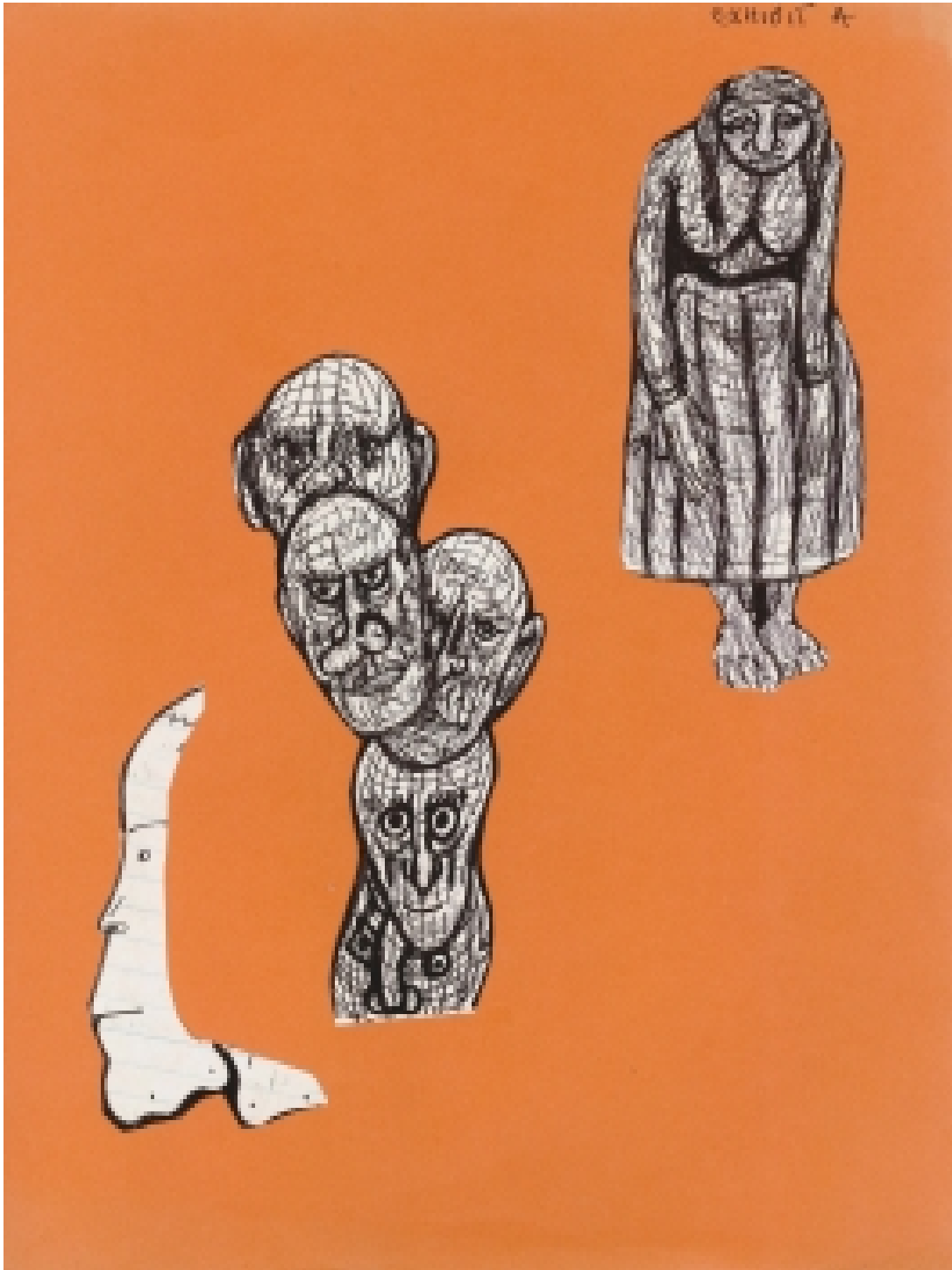


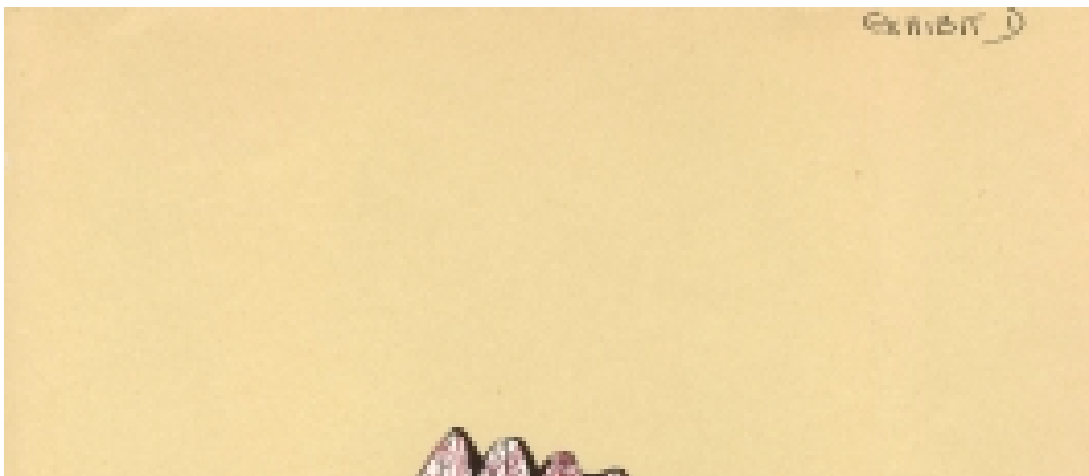
EXHIBIT B



EXHIBIT C



EXHIBIT D





REFERENCES

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