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INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT IN GROUP PSYCHOTHERAPY: AN INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The author presents an integrative approach to understanding and managing interpersonal conflicts that can be applied both to intragroup conflicts in psychotherapy groups and to the marital and organizational environment within either a psychoanalytical or an action-orientated framework. Four levels of intervention approaches are reviewed, including their underlying theoretical assumptions. At the first 'emotional' level of conflict-management, group leaders focus on the expression of pent-up hostility. At the second 'intrapsychic' level, they focus on the correction of perceptual distortions in one or both of the antagonists. At the third 'interpersonal' level, leaders focus on disturbances of interaction and communication between two antagonists and at the fourth 'group-as-a-whole' level, they focus on global group dynamic factors that seem to be influencing the conflict. Perspectives that focus solely on one level are seen as limited and incomplete.

Key words: conflict resolution, group analysis, group psychotherapy, integrative psychotherapy, psychodrama.

Interpersonal conflicts are universally present in human relations and become especially visible in group psychotherapy. The mere fact of being together in a group assures that there will always be some amount of friction among its members. Though such frictions may have an apparent 'negative' effect on the group, they are not necessarily something 'bad' or pathological to be got rid of. Rather, like states of crises, conflicts may be viewed as normal in healthy relations and if properly managed, as opportunities for development, growth and new learning (Bach and Goldberg, 1974; Ormont, 1984; Cornelius and Faire, 1989; Gans, 1989). Pines (1988: 57) observed that

. . . group analysts are trained to be sensitive to the balance between co-operation and conflict in the groups. . . [and] they bring to the attention of the group members the presence of both these centripetal and centrifugal forces.

Interpersonal conflicts are so central to the group therapeutic process that the learning gained as a result of their exploration is regarded by some practitioners as the *sine qua non* of group therapy. In group psychotherapy the expression of negative feelings towards other group members or towards the group leader may open up a more intimate and honest level of the relationship and may, in a paradoxical manner, contribute to the maintenance of groups as well as to the disturbance of interpersonal relations.

Conflict can be harnessed in the service of the group; the group members can, in a variety of ways, profit from conflict, provided its intensity does not exceed their

tolerance and provided that proper group norms have been established. (Yalom, 1975: 351-2)

However, despite the frequent occurrence and central importance of interpersonal conflicts and the resurgent interest in conflict-resolution techniques, conflict management in group psychotherapy remains a neglected issue. In view of the social and political tensions in many countries, the distinction between constructive and destructive conflicts in the development, maintenance and resolution of conflict has been increasingly blurred. Some practitioners respond with bewildered confusion and helplessness when called upon to manage situations in which people are openly antagonistic towards one another, either passively waiting for the tensions to diminish by themselves or observing how they develop into a general feeling of alienation which increases the drop-out rate and threatens to tear the group apart. Others employ resolution techniques in an orthodox and automatic fashion, without sufficient consideration as to what the fight is all about from various points of view. As a result, conflicts which could have been essential for the exploratory and therapeutic process of the group, remain insufficiently worked through during the course of therapy.

Drawing on interviews with several group therapists, on surveys of the theoretical and empirical literature (Walton, 1969; Deutsch, 1973; Cowger, 1979; Fisher and Dry, 1981; Doob, 1985; Bisno, 1988; Donahue and Kolt, 1993) and on conclusions from my own experience, I here describe four strategies of conflict management which practitioners employ in group psychotherapy, and discuss some of the controversies involved in their evaluation.

Conflict

An interpersonal conflict may be simply described as a clash between two individuals who are unwilling or unable to fulfil the expectations of each other. The following interaction between Philip and Pamela, which started out by Philip coming late to a group therapy session, illustrates such a collision. Pamela immediately reprimanded him for not coming on time, adding that she felt he was not serious about the group.

'I don't understand what you are angry about', Philip responded. 'I was in an important meeting and it was impossible for me to come here earlier.' 'Well then I'll explain', Pamela snapped. 'I expect you to come in time to our sessions, but you always have good excuses for coming late and you don't even consider what it does to us.' 'I'm sorry you are upset'. Philip said. 'but you are such a nuisance when you don't get what you want.' 'I didn't come here to be insulted', Pamela yelled, now red in the face and apparently upset. 'You are such an idiot. . .' 'Oh really', Philip responded, with thinly disguised irritation. 'You're not precisely a genius yourself.' 'Don't "oh really" me!' Pamela answered, leaning forward from her chair. 'I'm warning you, Philip, if you don't come on time next week, I will lock the door and leave you outside!' Philip looked at Pamela with wrathful indignation. 'If you want me out of the group, just say so!'

The friction between Pamela and Philip gradually escalated until it reached a point of irreconcilable antagonism. What had started out as a minor frustration because of personal disappointment rapidly developed into a head-on fight with a wish to ostracize, hurt and expel the opponent at any cost. Adding fuel to the fire were the malicious insults and pointless accusations of the antagonists and the initial satisfaction that some participants felt while watching the two go at each other.

Others, however, who had no idea of what had hit the group, responded with fearful silence. Startled by the rapid eruption of tensions, the group leader tried to remain calm while reflecting on what to say or do.

Management

Which management approach would best suit the present conflict?

There seemed to be a continuum of physiological, intrapsychic, interactional and group-related variables at work in this conflict and the group leader could focus on one or all of these. As it turned out, multiple sources of the conflict between Pamela and Philip were revealed during the actual and subsequent sessions, giving the group leader an opportunity to intervene on the various emotional, individual, interpersonal and social levels in succession and combination.

Considering the complex and almost infinite sources of various conflicts, management is surely a formidable undertaking.

Obviously, management approaches may be chosen according to what the fight is all about. For example, if suppression of aggression seems to be the underlying cause of tension, the group leader may find it useful to focus first on the emotional expression of aggression and perhaps suggest that the opponents honestly 'talk it out' or fight with one another. If transference-related issues later become predominant, the individual approach, that emphasizes intrapsychic transformation, may be employed. The interpersonal approach, with the group leader acting as mediator or facilitator of communication, may be chosen when interactional disturbances are observed.

Finally, when global group dynamic factors seem to have caused the conflict, an analysis of the meaning of the conflict for the group as a whole may be considered. Table I gives an overview of these four overlapping and highly interrelated approaches, their theoretical basis and their main objectives. Together they comprise a general model of conflict management which can be integratively used in succession or combination during various phases, or levels, of the management process.

TABLE 1
Model of Conflict Management Approaches in Group Psychotherapy

| Approaches | Theoretical basis | Main Objective |
|------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Emotional | Frustration-aggression | Expression of pent-up aggression |
| Intrapsychic | Transference displacement | Correction of perceptual distortion |
| Interpersonal | Interaction | Communication |
| Group-as-a-whole | Social psychology of groups | Transformation of group dynamics |

The four approaches may be simply and succinctly interpreted by the group leader in the following manner:

- You are angry because you are full of frustration! If each one of you expresses your own aggressions, and gets them out of your bodies, you may be able to get along better together.
- You are angry with one another because you can't stand him, and you can't stand her. Both of you need to take responsibility for your own anger which says more about yourself than about the other person. If you realize that he is not all you want him to be, and she is not all you want her to be, you may be able to accept one another as you really are and get along better together.
- You are angry with one another because you don't fit well together. The problem does not lie within either one of you but in the special interaction, or complementarity, between both of you. If both learn how to give and take collectively, you may be able to get along better together.
- You are angry with one another because of 'them', because you exist in a context that puts you in a position of conflict. If you learn to recognize and separate this outside pressure from your relationship and unite to cope with it, you may be able to get along better together.

I believe these four approaches to interpersonal conflict management are all-inclusive and more or less sum it all up. I now discuss them in more detail.

The Emotional Approach

Practitioners working according to the emotional approach attempt to resolve conflicts primarily by encouraging people to unload whatever pent-up anger that they may have hitherto kept in. The main assumption underlying this approach is the well-known frustration-aggression theory of Dollard et al. (1939), recently reformulated by Berkowitz (1989). According to this view, any frustration, or interference with a person's goal-directed activities, causes him or her to react with aggression which, whether innate or reactive (Simmel et al., 1983), must somehow find expression. If sufficient outlet is denied, it would lead to a build-up, like steam in a pressure cooker bursting to blow off, causing a variety of emotional and physical disturbances (Rubin, 1969; Smith, 1992).

The best way to get rid of the aggression is to let it out through some overt expression.

Group therapy is an excellent place for this activity: a kind of laboratory for learning how to express anger towards other people.

Almost all approaches to group therapy encourage participants to express their present anger in an honest, direct and straightforward manner, rather than with the tact and restraint that characterize people's behaviour in ordinary social situations. In various action-orientated forms of group therapy, such as encounter groups, bioenergetics, Gestalt, psychodrama and in marathon, sensitivity and human potential growth groups, participants are urged to express their anger both in words and in action; they are encouraged to scream, bang on an empty chair, stamp on the floor, or throw objects at the wall, and simultaneously, to pronounce their outrage in words. Frequently, mattresses, pillows or 'batacas' (foam-rubber bats) are used to pound on or with and two people involved in a fight may be urged to push each other down or wrestle in any manner they want.

In the session following the fight between Pamela and Philip, Pamela was cold, detached and deliberately hostile towards Philip. Pamela revealed that she had been deeply insulted by Philip's words 'you're not precisely a genius yourself' and, though she was the one who had initiated the name-calling, the reference to her intelligence had hit a sensitive spot. Philip admitted that he had intentionally offended Pamela because he couldn't stand her repeated aggressive outbursts towards him and her faked weakness and helplessness. As they continued to accuse one another in a subdued and indirect manner, the group leader suggested that they express their hostilities more directly while standing up. After some initial resistance, they agreed to give it a try.

Pamela jumped on her feet, pulling Philip along with her, keeping a tight grip on his elbow. He tried to wrench his arm free, but feared to use all his power. This seemed to make Pamela even more angry and she looked as though she would explode with rage. The small hurts and rejections had built up within her and she needed to lash out, and in the end, to take revenge. Suddenly, she darted forward with great force, starting to push Philip back. Taken by surprise Philip lost his balance for a moment but soon started to genuinely defend himself, pushing Pamela to the floor with fervour. They continued wrestling until exhausted and when finished they looked remarkably relieved, able to smile and joke about the whole incident. The group members, who had followed the incident with a mixture of fear and excitement, became more relaxed and able to share with Pamela and Philip what they felt during their fight.

While such an active approach would be unacceptable within a psychoanalytic framework of non-structured verbal interaction, the focus on emotional expression per se, as manifested in the interpretation of various defences (Rutan et al., 1988), is emphasized also in the verbal group therapies.

Expressing anger directly towards other people is also a part of all behavioural assertiveness training. In such training, participants are taught to behave assertively rather than submissively in interpersonal conflicts. First, they are urged to become more in touch with the physical manifestations of their anger. Second, anger is accepted as a legitimate emotion even though one may wish to be without it. Third, the precipitating frustrations are explored and the various possible sources of anger are identified. Fourth, non-verbal as well as verbal ways of expressing anger are tried out, for example through body posture, tone of voice and eye contact. In this process, feelings which have hitherto been denied expression are let out as fully as possible. Finally, participants are asked to tryout their newly learned behaviour in situations outside the therapy setting. The notion that expression leads to relief is easily accepted. Such release may help break the vicious circle of frustration-aggression-inhibition-repression which so often characterizes neurotic people.

Yet the question of whether or not the emotional approach can resolve conflicts remains a debatable issue. Critics (for example, Tavris, 1983) hold that aggressive expression is not only a worthless way of resolving conflicts, it actually makes people more angry than before. Similarly, with a mass of accumulated evidence from research studies of children, Bandura and Walters (1965) concluded that far from producing reduction of aggression, participation in aggressive behaviour maintained the behaviour at its original level and actually increased it.

It is clearly impossible to answer the general question whether expression of anger can help to resolve conflict without taking into consideration the personalities of the people involved. While expression may clearly provide a safety valve for surplus anger for people who are emotionally restricted and inhibited, and for compulsive personalities who are excessively concerned with conformity and adherence to standards of conscience, impulsive personalities who have explosive outbursts of aggression, contrariwise need to develop internal controls to restrain their overt anger and may therefore be less suitable for this approach.

Furthermore, the effect of expression seems to be highly influenced by the responses people receive to their overt aggression.

For example, when the expression of anger is met with retaliation, the experience usually results in a new frustration rather than in relief. Only when expression is met with acceptance and the antagonist openly admits that he or she was wrong will the new experience become reconciliatory and perhaps corrective. Thus giving expression to anger that was heretofore kept in, with the right antagonist and in the right group, can become an important new learning experience.

The Intrapsychic Approach

Practitioners working according to the intrapsychic approach attempt to resolve conflicts primarily by focusing on the hostility experienced by either one of the conflicting parties, and their tendency to view others with bitterness, distrust or resentment. The main assumption underlying this approach is that people reject one another and develop interpersonal conflicts because of their inclination to perceive and judge the other in a highly subjective and often distorted manner. Nisbett and Ross (1980) traced such errors in perception to the cognitive constructs or schematas which people employ to make some sense of the complex human world around them. Such constructs frequently include prejudices, stereotypes, faulty causal attributions of other people's intentions (Heider, 1958), or what psychoanalysts would call projections, displacements and transferences of negative internalized representations of figures from the past upon a present person.

Whatever terminology used, the result of any misperception is that the actual person of the antagonist is viewed in a faulty manner and not as he or she really is.

The tendency to project negative images upon other people increases in a group psychotherapy setting. When otherwise well-integrated neurotic people are brought together in a group, intense emotions of a childish origin often arise and overshadow the actual relationship in the here-and-now. These emotions constitute a primary source of information to the group leader as to how each participant develops, maintains and resolves interpersonal conflicts with others. From this perspective, it is a primary goal of practitioners working according to the individual approach to help participants see their antagonists in a less biased manner.

Confronting individuals with their highly subjective ways of relating may create the basis for non-transfereential relations, and, as a result, they may discover what kind of actual relationship is given to them by their antagonists as real persons. This is usually achieved by changing the focus from the antagonist to themselves, thus helping them to become more aware of the role the antagonist serves as a repository of disowned parts of Self (Pines, 1988), often traced first to a similar role in the present social

network and later to the same role in the family of origin. Frequently, conflicts may be thus resolved by either party becoming aware of how he or she blames the other for not fulfilling his or her uncompleted quest from the past, for example the often-unsatisfied need to receive unconditional love from a parental figure in childhood. Depending on the training of the group leader, this work may be done more or less in action.

Pamela had hoped that Philip would make the effort to arrive on time to the following session, and that he would be sympathetic towards her after their wrestling match.

But Philip was not at all what Pamela had hoped he might be.

Instead, he again came late and looked embittered, as if he had been laying up a reserve of resentment. Offended by Philip's arrogant behaviour towards her, Pamela again attacked him for being indifferent towards her and the others. 'You men are all alike', she exclaimed with contempt. 'You never really care about anyone else except yourselves!' Philip just shook his head in response.

At this point the group leader called attention to the disparate needs and expectations of both parties, focusing first on Pamela's unsatisfied need for attention and then on Philip's non-compliance with Pamela's wish. He asked each of them in turn to look carefully at the other and to re-examine whether the other person evoked feelings of frustration which were similar to feelings they had had to someone else from their past.

Pamela immediately came to think of her husband, who also neglected her by coming home late every evening, and of her father who had worked long hours in order to support the family. For her, 'men were all alike' and she intended to continue her war against them, no matter what. Pamela's judgement of men in general appeared highly influenced by her past and in conjunction with 'coming late', triggered off a furious response in her. Philip admitted that by coming late he expressed a kind of passive-aggressive rejection and negligence of the group members. The priority Philip gave to his work was also caused in part by his unhappy marriage. Philip mentioned that Pamela reminded him of his mother, whom he had resented for years because of her excessive obedience-demands on him. Both Philip and Pamela continued to work on their intrapsychic issues and as a result the conflict between them slowly cooled down.

While the intrapsychic approach is used frequently by group psychotherapists of all persuasions, its effectiveness as a conflict resolution technique is arguable. Critics hold that such an approach cannot resolve interpersonal conflicts because by emphasizing the intrapsychic source of hostility, the possible real evil nature of other people is insufficiently recognized. Instead of directing one's anger towards the other person, one is urged to look into oneself and as a result one may blame oneself for wrongdoings that one had no part in. Thus, legitimate aggression may become inhibited, introjected or sublimated, instead of being directed towards the person who was originally responsible for the frustration. Advocates find this critique oversimplified and dismissive, as it does not take into account the interactive perspective of the object-relations model which focuses on how one person's intrapsychic state of mind affects another's. Thus when the dynamics of both 'projectors' and 'targets' are analysed within the same exchange, the intrapsychic approach becomes profoundly effective.

However, interpersonal conflicts are rarely a case of one person being completely at fault and the other totally innocent. More typically, 'It takes two to start a fight' and consequently practitioners should focus on the interaction between both parties in the dispute, rather than only on the intrapsychic world within each person.

The Interpersonal Approach

The main assumption underlying the interpersonal approach is that conflicts typically occur in a social context, involving at least two persons who, for various reasons, do not get along. For example, we tend to dislike people who are different from us in values and beliefs, who do not reciprocate our liking for them, and who are abusive, malicious and generally unfriendly towards us. The correlation between attraction and similarity is robustly described in the social psychological literature. Various theories, such as transaction theory, reinforcement theory (Byrne and Clore, 1970) and exchange theory (Homans, 1961), emphasize that if there is insufficient mutuality, interdependency, balance and complementarity between the parties involved in a relationship, interpersonal conflicts will arise. 'Complementarity' (Carson, 1969) refers on the one hand to reciprocity and correspondence on the power-status and/or affiliation dimensions (Leary, 1957) and to symmetrical interactions on the control and/or equality dimensions (Bateson, 1979) on the other. Berne's (1964) analyses of human transactions in terms of complementary but highly inadequate games also come to mind. Writers from diverse persuasions also have published a large amount of interaction theory for the understanding of marital conflicts (for example, Gurman and Kniskern, 1978).

Instead of compatibility and cooperation, such interpersonal conflicts are characterized by tension and friction and by competition, jealousy or power struggles in which both parties may feel that 'I am right and you are wrong', and 'I am good and you are bad'. Invariably, poor communication is a common ingredient. The head-on collision between the two sets of irreconcilable beliefs creates the interpersonal conflict (Rogers, 1965).

The conflicts escalate as long as the parties continue to provoke one another, and in some cases they end only in a final violent confrontation. As described in game theory (Luce and Raiffa, 1957), people in conflict play a competitive game with one another, as in the classic duel of two men walking towards each other with guns levelled, the outcome being that one will win and the other will lose. In order to settle such fights in a way which is different from the destructive win/lose scenario, practitioners attempt to mediate between the parties, to make peace between them.

'Mediation' occurs whenever an impartial third party attempts to facilitate a voluntary agreement between two or more parties in conflict (Walton, 1969; Folberg and Taylor, 1984). Psychoanalytic group leaders take the role of mediator when acting as interpreters and catalysts of the interaction, attempting to facilitate communication, modify the interactional pattern and improve the understanding between the conflicting parties by recognizing the subtle transactional configurations and feedback mechanisms that support both the adult and childish elements in the relationship (Rapoport, 1988).

More behaviourally orientated group leaders mediate by giving advice, teaching fair play and using logic, diplomacy and emotional appeasement to help disputants reach mutually acceptable solutions.

Successful mediation, however, does not necessarily imply mutual consensus. According to Blood (1960), other possible satisfactory outcomes of mediation may be (1) compromise: both go half-way and get some of their demands satisfied, (2) concession: one drops his or her demands and is allowed a graceful retreat, (3) synthesis: a new solution is found that was hitherto not thought of, (4) separation: both go their own way, or (5) accommodation, which is essentially a kind of resignation and recognition of the failure to reach agreement: both 'agree to disagree'. Likewise in marital therapy couples in conflict may be helped to achieve a higher level of agreement, whether the outcome is staying married or obtaining divorce (Sholevar, 1981).

Maxwell Jones's charismatic leadership style (Ascher and Shokol, 1976) is a fine illustration of mediation within a therapeutic community. Jones was able to resolve conflicts in his groups by subtle redefinitions of clashes between people: 'trouble-makers' became 'risk-takers', 'power-struggles' became 'shared decisionmaking', 'conflict' became 'confrontation', and thus he succeeded in transforming potentially negative and destructive interpersonal tensions into positive learning opportunities.

A more action-orientated mediation technique, frequently recommended for conflict management, is role reversal. This technique, borrowed from psychodrama, is based on the assumption that if antagonists put themselves in the position of the other, they will be forced to take a new view of the situation and hopefully reconcile their differences (Kellermann, 1992).

In an attempt to follow up the intrapsychic explorations of Philip and Pamela with some mutual agreement, the group leader suggested that they reverse roles. After some initial resistance, they agreed, and as they slowly warmed up to each other's role, they repeated the earlier exchange of accusations. Before long, however, they started to argue as vehemently as before, but from opposite positions. When they had finally ventilated their anger and expressed their fantasies about what was going on within the other person, they became silent, looking seriously at one another. It became clear that something else was going on between them besides the apparent fight. As if he had finally understood the position of Pamela, Philip (still in the role of Pamela) started to smile and said:

'You're a bastard Philip! You don't care about anyone except yourself.' 'Well, I'm glad you care about me', Pamela answered in the role of Philip. 'I wish more people would care as much as you do.' 'I'm sorry I hurt your feelings', Philip responded as himself, now falling out of role. 'I didn't know you cared so much!' 'Well, I do', Pamela said, 'that's why I get so offended when you come late. If you want me to continue to care, please come in time next week.'

As a result of this role reversal, Pamela and Philip slowly developed a more reciprocal and equal relationship of give-and-take; a kind of respect for the (albeit different) position of the other that had replaced the earlier self-centred stance. More importantly, however, they started to communicate on a deep personal level, sharing their diverse interpersonal needs and feelings of rejection when these needs were neglected.

Role reversal frequently creates an immediate shift in perception which facilitates reconciliation. Unfortunately, however, many antagonists are initially stubbornly

unwilling to truly reverse roles with someone they conceive as their enemy. If they do agree to reverse roles, they do so for a short period of time, repeat the main message of their opponent and then resort to their old positions.

Carlson-Sabelli (1989) did not find sufficient research evidence to verify the assumption that role reversal promotes reconciliation between parties in conflict. A prior period of hostile ventilation and intrapsychic exploration seems to be needed.

The relevant literature is full of accounts of non-violent resolutions of a variety of conflicts as a result of successful mediation by third parties (for example, Rubin, 1980; Fisher, 1983). However, textbooks on the subject (for example, Deutsch, 1973) emphasize that if the initial positions of the conflicting parties are compatible and the relationship is based on cooperation and trust, the interpersonal approach will be more effective than if the initial attitudes are incompatible and the relationship is based on competition. For example, if the parties remain involved in a power struggle, mediation will surely fail.

Though 'interpersonal learning' is regarded as one of the most powerful therapeutic aspects in group psychotherapy (Yalom, 1975), many practitioners feel personally uncomfortable with the mediation role of the interpersonal approach because they do not want to act as 'peace-makers' who implicitly promote norms of friendly coexistence and reconciliation at the expense of natural human aggression. Rather, they prefer that the group members decide for themselves which norms they want to adopt regarding the boundaries of hostile expression. As a result, many group leaders prefer to shift their focus of intervention from the parties involved in conflict to the group-as-a-whole.

The Group-as-a-whole Approach

Group leaders who work according to the group-as-a-whole approach (Foulkes, 1964; Kibler and Stein, 1981) take into account the whole context in which conflict occurs and apply concepts of individual dynamics to the group as if the group would be able to behave, feel and think like an individual. They view intragroup tensions as a specific disharmony in the structure or general system (Durkin, 1972) of the entire group, considering also the effects on the group of the larger environment and ecology.

Social psychology has contributed much to our understanding of how social forces in the group-as-a-whole disturb the interpersonal relations between individual members of a group (Cartwright and Zander, 1968; Sherif and Sherif, 1969; Shaw, 1976). These social forces have been variously termed 'collective unconscious' (e.g. Jung), 'group mind' (William McDougall), 'group pressure' and 'group dynamics' (Lewin, 1939), 'basic assumption cultures' and 'group mentality' (W.R. Bion), 'sociometry' of the group (Jacob Moreno), 'group matrix' (Foulkes), 'common group tension' (Henry Ezriel), 'invisible group' (Yvonne Agazarian and R. Peters) and 'group focal conflict' (D.S. Whitaker and M.A. Lieberman). They all depict the group as something 'more' than the sum of its members, having its own (often concealed) goals, norms of behaviour, patterns of communication, and power structure which may produce social constraints and interpersonal conflicts. One of the more colourful descriptions of people who struggle for social dominance in such a 'human zoo' was written by Morris (1969).

Small group research has for decades studied the intricate relationship between conflict and, for example, group setting, group composition, group size, group norms, group process, leadership roles and stages in the development of groups, assuming that aggression is a regulating force in the dynamics of groups (Lewin, 1948).

When managing conflicts according to this approach, the task of the group leader is to analyse and handle these various forces and transform those that have a restrictive effect on the group into more enabling ones. In order to achieve this goal, practitioners of various persuasions employ more or less interpretative and action-oriented techniques to facilitate cooperation and development of group cohesion, the 'prime prerequisite for the successful management of conflict' (Yalom, 1975: 355). In this process, joint interest in the goals of the group is fostered and active participation by all group members is encouraged. The group leader makes a democratic effort to involve the resources and reactions of the 'non-combatant' members of the group, inviting them to contribute, resonate or help resolve emergent issues regarding, for example, confidentiality, decision-making and social interaction outside the group. The following vignette may illustrate this approach.

When Pamela, at the beginning of one session, suggested that she lock the door against Philip, who had again come late, the group became deeply involved in the conflict. Voices and passions rose as members expressed arguments for or against the suggestion. By the time Philip finally arrived and was let in the group had been split into two opposite camps, one in his favour and the other opposed. Observing this process of splitting, the group leader pointed out that the two groups represented two central forces in the group-as-a-whole. The group round Philip came to represent the freedom of the 'id' ('you do what you want') while the group around Pamela came to represent the restrictions of the 'superego' ('you must learn to conform if you want to be included'). The group was put in a position where it had to make an impossible choice between either needsatisfaction or conscience.

Considering the dominant behaviour of these two positions in the past and the resulting passivity of the group members the group leader suggested that perhaps the time had come for the group to take charge of both positions, enabling them to exist side by side without monopolizing the group with their constant battle. As the group started to digest this interpretation and work on possible different alternatives, the fight between Pamela and Philip receded as if it had only been an overt expression of invisible forces in the group-as-a-whole, and a more cooperative group climate evolved.

Most group analysts adopt a neutral position towards the group, observing and reporting on group conflict without siding with or against any of the parties involved. Critics (for example, Bach, 1974) hold that such an attitude of objective passivity violates the intimate spirit of authentic interpersonal relations and makes any effort toward genuine conflict management impossible. They argue that such an often-defensive 'laissez-faire' attitude (disguised as neutrality), is as useless as are United Nations troops who leave the field of battle when the fighting starts. It is my position that group leaders who have an interest in conflict management must occasionally take a firm and positive stand on crucial issues and set clear limits on disruptive behaviour. For example, in the case of Philip, the habitual latecomer who drifts into the session after it has started, the group leader must ultimately enforce the basic rules of the group and remove him from the group if he is unable to come on time.

The group-as-a-whole approach is sometimes criticized as based on a faulty assumption. A group cannot be made responsible for conflicts because 'after decades of research and hundreds of investigations, there is nothing approaching consensus about what a therapeutic group is' (Kaul and Bednar, 1986: 710). Thus if a group is not viewed as a specific entity that can feel, think and behave, it certainly cannot cause conflict. Any group-as-a-whole intervention, such as a group process interpretation, runs the risk of being frankly delusional in its attempt to evoke a response from a recipient that in the final analysis is only an imaginary metapsychological construct.

Despite this criticism, however, a great mass of research is available on Small Group processes (for example, Hare, 1976) supporting the group-as-a-whole approach as a viable alternative to other approaches of conflict management. One group-as-a-whole approach, based on the tradition of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London (Rice, 1965; Miller and Rice, 1967), has been employed successfully around the world to manage conflicts in large groups (de Mare et al., 1991). Clearly any practitioner who neglects the formidable group processes which operate in the development, maintenance and resolution of intragroup conflicts, disregards the very essence of group therapy.

Conclusion

Any conflict management effort must firmly acknowledge the intricate interplay among different levels of interpersonal conflict, suggesting that human aggression is caused by a complex of related factors, including instinct, drive, physiological state, genetic makeup, individual developmental history, environmental provocation and social situation (Bandura, 1973). This interplay demands the employment of an integrative management strategy which, according to my experience, will be more effective than the use of any individual approach in isolation.

An integrative approach to conflict management (Heitler, 1987) must take into consideration more than one, and frequently all, levels of understanding and intervention at various stages in the conflict-management process. Whether working within a psychodynamic, or an action-orientated therapeutic framework, the conflict-management process spanning over a few or many sessions should include some amount of ventilation, some identification of individual issues, some interpersonal reconciliation and some analysis of the group-as-a-whole in combination. The omission of one level of intervention may leave the antagonists with some amount of unresolved tensions and the conflict management uncompleted.

The levels of intervention seem to be arranged in a priority hierarchy, following a certain order of preference. As those on one level are resolved, those on the next take precedence. Thus, when the physiological needs of aggressive expression are satisfied, the needs of the next level, the intrapsychic exploration of personal preferences press for resolution. If some progress is made on this level, the interpersonal work on reciprocal interaction and communication will have more chance to succeed. Finally, if people are in peace with both their bodies and their minds, and with each other, they can start to deal with more global, group-dynamic factors that bother them.

It is not easy to reconcile in one model several diverse approaches and to integrate them within one and the same group.

The fundamental theoretical assumptions and treatment goals often seem to be contradictory. This contradiction, however, disappears as soon as the total picture is analysed from all the various points of view and it is my experience that the four levels of conflict management can be made compatible with one another through the flexible employment of an integrative approach to conflict management. In the final analysis, anything less than such a global and holistic perspective is a reduction and simplification of the complex and multidimensional bio-physiological-emotional-organic-social systems involved in any conflict.

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