

Figure and Ground in Group Analytic Theory and Training

Figura y fondo en la Teoría y Entrenamiento Grupo Analítica

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Abstract

This paper was resulted from rethinking the work of the Training Committee of the Institute of Group Analysis in the late eighties. We had spent many years devising a new curriculum, visualising what it could do if it did not have an already existing curriculum and could start from scratch. What was done over previous years was to put together a curriculum based on growing experience, inevitably it represented the accretion of the years and so we played with ideas of what we could do if we could start from scratch. What we were trying to do was to grasp the totality of what we were trying to teach. This paper simply stretches out my own view of the phenomenon of group analysis, how it comes to be and its position in the context of human sciences and the history of ideas.

Resumen

Este documento fue el resultado de repensar el trabajo del Comité de Formación del Instituto de Análisis de Grupo a finales de los años ochenta. Habíamos pasado muchos años ideando la elaboración de un nuevo plan de estudios, la visualización de lo que se podría hacer si no se tenía un plan de estudios y cómo se podría empezar de cero. Lo que se hizo a partir de lo recogido de los años anteriores fue unir un curriculum basado en la experiencia desarrollada, inevitablemente representó la acumulación de los años y consideramos las ideas de lo que podríamos hacer si pudiéramos empezar de cero. Lo que tratábamos de hacer era captar la totalidad de lo que estábamos intentando enseñar. Este documento simplemente explica mi propia visión del

fenómeno del grupo análisis, cómo se trata y su posición en el contexto de las ciencias humanas y la historia de las ideas.

The Place of Group Analysis in the History of Ideas

Group Analysts regard Foulkes' ideas as being a significant contribution to the history of ideas, a unique amalgam of psychology, which includes psychoanalysis, a psychology that also includes ideas from Gestalt psychology. It has a significant contribution from neurology, as a result of Foulkes' involvement with Kurt Goldstein. Goldstein's neurology, a Gestalt neurology, is a very significant development in the history of physiology and neurology. Lastly there is a very significant contribution from social psychology, from sociology and from history, from the idea of an evolution of man in a social context.

I shall try to put together a sketch of the origin and development of these different ideas, of psychology, of neurology, and of the human sciences of culture and of history. We have to go back not only to the nineteenth century, but a long way further back to see some of the ways in which ideas of human development and human society have evolved over the ages. Principally, we do have to be concerned with the nineteenth century, because it is towards the end of the nineteenth century that psychoanalysis begins to emerge as the psychology of unconsciousness, in contrast to the psychology of consciousness. In the nineteenth century, when psychology developed itself as a separate discipline from philosophy, it was concerned with the psychology of consciousness, with the faculties, with attention, perception, and all the things for which an actual experimental science of psychology was set up. This was an atomistic reductive form of psychology set up for the first time in psychological laboratories and psychologists were quite triumphant that they had separated themselves from philosophers and were dealing with an empirical science.

The attempt to develop an exact science of psychology which was the psychology of consciousness, set aside, ignored or saw as redundant, many of the issues that concerned philosophers and psychologists previously, which were the broad sweep of human ideas, human nature, human feeling, human emotions, the nature of man in society; all these were put aside. What developed was an individual form of psychology; at the same time appeared sociology, an attempt to look at society without having to think about individuals, and in the gap between them, between the atomistic individual psychology and the sociology there began to emerge a social psychology in which the individual and society is meshed together rather than being separated into the individual and society, and that is where some of our ideas in group analysis emerge.

The psychology of consciousness was concerned with measurements and the idea of an association psychology, in which everything could be reduced to its elements. Gradually around about the 1890's people began to realise that it was not possible to go on reducing psychology to elements and an attempt to synthesise ideas came together. With this attempt at synthesis, we can see the beginnings of a Gestalt psychology of holisms; feelings, and the analysis of feelings and the understanding of feelings, begin to come back into psychology. This is connected with the work of Wilhelm Wundt in Germany, who was the first psychologist to set up a psychological laboratory and from whom a great deal of modern psychology begins. What tends to be forgotten about Wundt, is that he saw psychology as an attempt to grasp the totality of the human being, so that as well as setting up a psychological laboratory to study faculties, associations and memories, he devoted the last 20 years of his life to developing what was called Folk Psychology, in German: Volk Psychologie. It is translated as Folk Psychology, which is really the psychology of culture, myths, legends, language, all the ways in which the human being in society can be understood through his cultural products. Wundt set the stage for the study of a much broader dimension of psychology in terms of myths, legends, language, and the historical development of the individual. He studied different societies, different myths, different legends, the different ways in which the human culture, the human family developed.

At the same time as Wundt was developing his ideas, which are in contrast to isolationism and the attempt to reduce psychology to its smallest elements, there were also in the 1890's people who spoke for a completely different approach to the study of mankind, an attempt to study, to restudy the soul, the mind, the total personality; in France, the ideas of Bergson 'elan vital', the stream of consciousness that cannot be reduced to its elements, which has to be studied in a totality. The changes in the intensity of feelings and ideas are not quantitative, they are qualitative, and therefore are not measurable. One has to find another way to approach and to grasp the nature of feelings, the nature of the mind, the continuity and the flow of ideas; we see this in literature, in Proust, in Joyce, in modern literature that looks at flow and continuity rather than the breakdown into isolated events. In America, William James whose study of the self, the person and the stream of consciousness, grasping the paradox of how we have continuity within change so that even though there is a stream of thoughts or feelings or attitudes that can vary so much, there is still an identity theme, there is something that holds the whole self together. James wrote so well about the self, as the personal self, the social self and the spiritual self, the basic building blocks for the psychology of self and identity that we still need today.

The Social Self

Studying the personal self and the social self, is where group analysis is, understanding the relationship and interpenetration of the personal self and the social self, the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ as he called them; the ‘I’ as the knower of the self and the ‘me’ as that which the ‘I’ knows about: “I know myself”. Much of the ‘me’ side of the self is the introjection, the internalisation of society that makes up the me, but also there is my own individuality, the uniqueness of the self that knows the self. James’ work continued into the work of Dewey and George Herbert Mead in the Chicago School of Symbolic Interaction, which I find relevant to the theory of group analysis. So here we have psychology that was atomistic, then synthetic, and then holistic, an attempt to grasp the nature of the whole rather than to reduce things into parts.

Within psychology the development of Gestalt psychology that comes about the period 1910, Wertneimer, Kohler and Koffka, come together significantly. Their fourth meeting, when they tried to develop this new school of psychology, Gestalt psychology, occurred in Frankfurt. Frankfurt is a nodal point for a great deal of group analysis, because it is there where Foulkes worked. It is at Frankfurt where the study of Marxism and psychoanalysis, of economic forces and psychological forces, came together, influencing the synthesis that Foulkes attempted to evolve. It is where Eric Fromm and Freda Fromm-Reichman started and where modern sociology and psychoanalysis starts to come together.

The Whole Person

In Gestalt psychology, which is an attempt to grasp the whole of the thing rather than to study the parts, the Gestaltians study perceptions, how it is we can recognise a tune whatever key it is put into; how is it we can follow themes and wholes, how perception is always a totality of an act and not a part of an act. Ingenious work was done in the field of perception to show that we always actively attempt to grasp the whole of things; this is an important element in modern psychology and is eventually what contributes to group analysis.

Within the field of Gestalt psychology originate concepts such as figure and ground in the work of Rubin, the Danish psychologist, who developed the famous two vases that become a face picture, which shows that perception is always actively working between figure and ground; Gestalt comes into neurology through the work of Kurt Goldstein. Goldstein, best known as a neurologist, was also deeply interested in psychotherapy; a critic of psychoanalysis

but knowledgeable about it, Goldstein saw neurology as an aspect of biology. It was not a separate science, it was an aspect of biology, of the human organism and his most significant work, the book 'The Organism' written in 1924 is devoted to this theme. In Frankfurt he set up an institute for the study of brain injuries, which during the First World War became significant as a place for the study of brain damage, for active treatment and rehabilitation. Goldstein was not simply interested in diagnosis, he was concerned with how does the human person react to such significant traumata as brain damage, how does the person attempt to compensate, to cope and to integrate the damage into the function of the whole personality? Goldstein's work was concerned with both the most-minute study of cerebral and psychological function. He studied how the aphasic patient struggles with the brain deficit that does not enable him to communicate; how does the person adapt to all the difficulties he has. His study of the damaged CNS showed that it is the function of the whole organism, not simply of a restricted part of the central nervous system, but of the whole person and of the whole organism, all the reflexes, the balancing reflexes, tonic reflexes, all these things are altered if you minutely examine the person; everything is different, everything is concerned both with the damage that the organism has suffered and the attempt to adapt to the damage, so that the person functions as well as possible within the capacity of recovery of the central nervous system. His emphasis was on the organism trying to find the best possible adaptation to its circumstances; its circumstances are both the situation which it is in, figure-ground, organism in the environment, but also adaptation to its own inner condition, its damage, the functioning.

The Contribution of Neurology

Neurology has been very important both in the development of psychoanalysis and of group analysis, but there are two different neurological models. The British work of Hughlings Jackson had a very considerable influence on Freud. Hughlings Jackson had shown how the central nervous system functioned in levels; there is always the primitive level of functioning, inhibited by the function of the spinal centres, which are inhibited by the functions of the brain stem, then the cortex, so there is constantly a system of levels. In a symptom, the function of a lower level that had been inhibited by a higher level has now come into prominence, therefore the spasticity, the tremors, or whatever, emerges as a result of the damage of the higher level which is now released from the inhibitory action, so that the lower level show through. Freud, who was very well aware of Jackson's work, and who, like Jackson,

worked on aphasia, where his most considerable work in neurology was, took over Jackson's ideas; the id represents the basic levels, the primitive levels of functioning of the mind, corresponding to the primitive levels of the nervous system; the ego and the superego represent the higher levels, culture taken into the personality, that blocks the primitive. When the primitive is released in the individual as a result of illness the id pressures overwhelm the ego, in group psychology the mass, the group, releases a person from the inhibitions at the higher level so we see the primitive function in mass crowd group situations.

Goldstein's model was a different one. Goldstein said we cannot understand aphasia, the damaged person's functioning by studying the levels of the nervous system, because we have to study language, psychology, the adaptation of the individual; that will tell us what is happening to the brain damaged person. What we see is the function of the whole person adapting to the damage and to the environment. So here we have a different form of neurology, a psychodynamic neurology, significantly different to Jackson's neurology. Jackson's neurology influences Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the individual; Goldstein's neurology sees the individual functioning as totality in relationship to the environment; Foulkes took that approach into his model of the functioning of the individual and of the group. Goldstein's model is a model of adaptation and actualisation; it is the struggle of the person to find the best possible adaptation to their circumstances. Within psychiatry this led directly to the work of Freda Fromm-Reichman working with psychotic people in Chestnut Lodge. The Sullivanian group were also working in that field and Sullivan was the first person to work with groups of psychotics and to examine the environment of the psychotic, to look at the ward situation rather than the treatment of the individual. Goldstein's work led to work like Maslow's ideas of self-actualisation and to a considerable input into the latest schools of humanistic psychology, so Goldstein's influence was very strong in that direction.

Situating the Individual in Historical Time

Significant about Goldstein's work is that it is an adaptational psychology, which means that as the environment changes, so individuals have to change in their adaptation to the environment. In what way is that different to the basic Freudian psychoanalytic model? The thesis that I put forward is that looking at psychoanalysis in terms of the history of ideas, what you see is that psychoanalysis is developed at a certain era in European history by a particular set of persons, who have a need to struggle with their own social environ-

ment, to find a way of adapting to this environment and psychoanalysis is the theory which represents their adaptation to that environment.

Very briefly, the theory is that Freud, a member of a particular social class, the emerging middle class, a Jew in a difficult anti-Semitic environment, blocked in his progress, moving from neurology to psychology, incorporating a number of neurological ideas into this, developed psychoanalysis as what has been called an 'a-historical and counter-political psychology'. What does this mean? Firstly, that Freud does not see psychoanalysis as an historical phenomenon; he sees psychoanalysis as applicable right back to the early history of mankind; the struggle with the impulses, the gradual development of ego, inhibition of impulses and slow development of culture. Basically the same model would apply over historical time because Freud does not take into account developments in history and society. A 'counter-political psychology' means that the individual, any one person, be they peasant, plebian, capitalist, aristocrat, monarchist, governor, slave or master, has much the same internal structure; they all have id impulses, struggle with internalised parental figures, particularly in Freud's early psychology, with father figures who we have all internalised into our superegos. Basically it is an Oedipal level struggle of the individual against the internalised parental images. Whosoever you be, you have the same internal structure; you have the same struggles, be you a member of the ruling class or a member of the oppressed classes. In that sense it can be described as a counter-political psychology, one that flattens the hierarchy of society and presents a universalistic psychology, which can discount social psychology.

There is much research into the politics of the time and into Freud's individual development to show how he developed this particular unique psychology. Now if that is so, and it is a contestable thesis, what is missing in a psychoanalytic psychology, what we need to bring in is a more comprehensive psychology of the individual in society, to bring back history, philosophy, the history of ideas, to see how to situate the individual in historical times. Much of the history of psychology is the history of the individual, but there is also a branch of psychology called that of the 'supra individual', a term that we are not very familiar with in English, which I came across in an interesting book on the history of psychology written by Muller-Frienfels, a German, in 1935.

The 'supra individual' is that which has been beyond and above the individual: culture, history, language, all those things which the individual is born into and is totally unconscious of, because we are simply born into that situation and we have no idea that it would be possible to be immersed in a different sort of society; our language is the language, our family structure is the family structure. In group analysis there is a history of the supra-individu-

al which we call ‘the social unconscious’, because we are unaware of it until something happens to make us conscious of it; like figure-ground, it is the ground in which we are immersed until suddenly we come up against an event which makes us aware of it as the figure rather than the ground.

Foulkes’ ideas about the individual as a nodal point in a network begin to emerge in the history of ideas; through Goldstein in the form of psychodynamic neurology in which the central nervous system always functions as a whole, where any neurone or system within the central nervous system is part of the total whole and it is that network of the whole that we have to study. It comes out clearly in the German philosopher and historian Dilthey; a turn of the century person who died in the 1920’s, he was a considerable contributor to modern philosophy. Dilthey describes the person as being immersed in human networks. He made a famous distinction between the cultural sciences and the natural sciences; the natural sciences are based upon material, cognitive structures and association; then we study nature as external to the individual, foreign, outside ourselves.

In the cultural sciences, the study is of the facts of inner experience, emotions and the will. The individual is inter-penetrated by objective, socio-cultural reality, the society, which is our world. Foulkes uses similar words, that we are penetrated to our very core by the colossal forces of society and raises this as a counter argument to psychoanalytic instinct theory. Psychoanalytic instinct theory, now undergoing radical revision, postulates that the mind is a mental apparatus driven by instincts, basically biological. Though this has been largely replaced by a more motivational psychology there is the idea that there are driving forces within the individual, the primary drives of sexuality and aggression. Foulkes says we are penetrated to our basic core by the colossal forces of society, by which he means history, language, culture; the situation in which we are immersed. Dilthey said the same: the cultural systems of religion, art, justice, science, language and morality are the enduring systems embodied in individuals, each individual is the crossing point of several systems. Here too we have the idea of the nodal point and the crossing of systems. Dilthey was concerned with the issues of what is the nature of inner perceptions, the *erleben*, the direct experience. A great interest in the late 19th/early 20th century psychology was how to separate the act of perception from the content of perception, act psychology, originating with Brentano, the idea that psychology is always the active grasping of something by the will, a direct experience which we can separate from the content of what has actually be understood and grasped. The experience that Dilthey called *erleben* was the phenomenon of the entire mind altogether: a single occurrence born into the totality of mental life by connections, which cannot be explained, they

can only be understood. He negates the reductive attempt to explain everything but turns towards the grasping of an understanding within psychology and the different cultural sciences, the difference between explaining and understanding is important; some psychologies attempt to explain everything, others attempt not to explain things but attempt to understand them. What is the definition of understanding? Understanding is of the nexus, a word that Foulkes uses — plexus and nexus — a nexus of meaningful relationships, grasping the inner meaningful nexus in the life and actions of an individual, to penetrate into the specific system of values of a mental nexus. Dilthey sees psychology as a cultural science, an attempt to grasp a complexity of things and to bring them together into the grasp of formal understanding. In that he follows some aspects of German romantic psychology, the 19th century psychology exemplified by Goethe, who coined the word 'Anschauung' that leads to 'Weltanschauung.'

Society and History

Foulkes was influenced by the sociologist, Norbert Elias, who lived to the age of 90. Elias' classic works were related to the study of what he called 'The Civilising Process'. Elias' first volume on the civilising process is well worth reading because of the different viewpoint that psychoanalysis leaves out, the psycho-historical perspective. Foulkes' two reviews of Elias' works appeared in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* before the Second World War. Elias had studied the evolution of social structures such as manners, etiquette, the way in which we handle the most basic aspects of our organic living. Looking back, say to the 13th century, how do people regard their bodies? How did they regard the nature of the functions of eating, excreting, sexuality, living together in society? How did they arrange their living arrangements, how did they live together, how did they sleep? He studied the books of etiquette which tell people what is the right way to eat, for instance, moving from the way in which everybody had their food together in the same pot, putting their hands in and grabbing a bit, to the introduction of separate plates, the introduction of knives, forks and spoons, how these things develop over time. There is a point at which people do not do these things and then they gradually do them. What at one time was completely acceptable as the norm of human functioning became unacceptable; one develops separate places for spitting into, whereas in the past one spat anywhere, or threw the bones over one's back and didn't mind if the dog ate them up. Gradually people get ideas about cleanliness, of hygiene, that you don't have intercourse in public,

you have a private room for that. Privacy develops before the public and the private sphere begin to differentiate, we internalise those ideas so we begin to develop a different psychic structure, with private parts of the self and other parts which are exposed to the public. These boundaries are constantly shifting, so that ideas of social morality, of things, which are sanctioned, guarded by the social defences of shame, guilt, inhibition, disgust, constantly shift and develop with the centuries. This is why Foulkes said that the individual is permeated to his very core by the colossal forces of society, because were we born several centuries ago, things, which are totally unacceptable to us now, were then normal and we would have behaved accordingly. The norm is always shifting, therefore the individual's drives are always changing; the sexual drives, the aggressive drives, the appetitive norms are always changing, because society is changing the way in which these things are handled.

The Influence of Erik Erikson and Others

When Foulkes was first developing his ideas he referred to the work of Erik Erikson, one of the principal people to introduce the social into psychoanalysis. Erikson, instead of writing about psycho-sexual development, writes about psycho-social development, in which he integrates the psychoanalytic drives and zones into ways of behaviour which are part of a particular society and which differ from one culture to another. Erikson's definition of the drives and of the instinctual nature of the human being is that, opposed to the animal, which is born with instincts which adapt them to nature, the human being is born with instincts which relate to a restricted segment of nature; that restricted segment he defines as the maternal environment, so the human individual is born adapted to relate to a maternal caregiving figure, not to be self fulfilling, but related to a particular segment of nature which is the caregiving environment. As we go up the evolutionary ladder we see this developing, so that as we reach the human being we find that the instinctual drives are constructed by the individual maternal infant relationship, that it is not simply a given drive but it is a drive which mother and infant fashion for themselves out of a particular individual interaction. Other theoreticians such as Heinz Lichtenstejn and Hans Loewald, whose work is also significant in this direction, have also built up the idea of a matrix relationship of the individual to the environment, which is close to group analytic ideas.

Conclusion

I have attempted to draw an impressionistic sketch of the way in which biology, psychology, the history of ideas, the history of society, come together as strands, as intersecting segments into what we then try to fashion into the background theory of group analysis. That theory gives us the capacity to construct new situations, the small therapy group, the median and the large group, to understand groups in society. We can then feel we have a valid tool for working with the individual because we have the tools to see the individual and the group as figure against ground; we have the ideas that the group functions as a whole, that the group tries to adapt itself, that the function of the conductor of the group is to enable to group to adapt itself to function as well as possible as a whole group in relationship to the environment, external and internal. The internal environment of the group is formed by the pathology that people bring into the group, so the group has actively to strive to adapt and to adapt optimally to the stresses that each individual brings to the group, but they also bring into the group the healthy adaptive functions of the individual within the group, so we have the balance between the group adapting both to its psychopathology and to its intrinsic capacity for developing as a healthy group.

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