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A response to Kaori Sakagami's "Witnessing Hope in the Dark through Documentary Filmmaking" and her Prison Circle

Una respuesta a "Presenciando la esperanza en la oscuridad a través del cine documental" de Kaori Sakagami y su libro "Prison Circle"

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It is a privilege and an honour for me to respond to Kaori Sakagami's inspiring presentation based on her documentary films about the life in therapeutic communities within certain kinds of prisons for men in Japan and the United States of America—or more precisely in certain geographical areas of these two countries—who have been incarcerated for life with limited chances for parole. I was deeply moved by these films. As Kaori says, "Films don't just educate; they shake us awake." I also appreciate her acknowledging the importance of our work as psychoanalytically and sociologically informed group therapists who have embraced the importance of enlightened witnessing based on:

- Establishing and maintaining connection;
- Through listing and hearing;
- Using the language of the "other;"
- Respecting authentic com-passion;
- Recognizing the existence of perpetrators and victims in each of us.

Although Kaori sees the universality of the human condition, she also sees its sociocultural and political particularities; the importance of the biological and of the social; and the unconscious mind and its more conscious manifestations — in other words, the iceberg of human beings and their groupings. She is interested in the theoretical, clinical and practical aspects of questions such as: why are some of us better able than others to contain our aggressive and violent feelings, and even to make creative use of them, which is not merely a matter of the strength of such feelings? What personal and social conditions regulate what we have come to call "enactments"?

An exploration of such questions is, however, not Kaori's task today. Acknowledging the importance of this task, I would like to be a kind of bridge of communication to Kaori as a director of documentary films about the topic before us. In other words, I would like to be an enlightened witness of her work.

First, I would like to acknowledge some connections of Kaori's message with the history and mission of the International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes (IAGP) itself. Several of our senior members have been central in the therapeutic community movement, for example, Malcolm Pines, Stuart Whiteley, and Estela Welldon, who has been an innovator in working with female perpetrators. Others, too, I am sure. Within the field of Group Analysis narrowly defined, the work of Dr. Gwen Adshead, from England, concerning mental illness and criminality must be cited. Gwen was the recent Reith Lecturer for the BBC. The work of Miriam Berger, our colleague from Israel, has addressed the importance of witnessing in the context of social trauma. Miriam was a recent Foulkes Lecturer. I believe that my editorial work with Haim Weinberg and our collaborators concerning the social unconscious has been useful — many of these colleagues are here this week. Our work is based on cross-cultural comparisons (Hopper, 2024; Hopper & Weinberg, 2011, 2016, 2017).

As many of you know and may even have expected me to discuss today, I have developed my theory of incohesion: aggregation/massification in the unconscious life of groups in order to explain personal processes of trauma and addiction in terms of both transgenerational sociogenic processes and of more idiosyncratic personal processes, and to explain how they are manifested in collective processes (Hopper, 2023). Aggregation and massification are the polarized forms of incohesion. Equally incohesive, they are manifested in patterns of interaction, patterns of normation, patterns of communication, as well as in other dimensions of the tripartite matrix of social systems. The "unintegration" of interaction, the "insolidarity" of normation, and the "incoherence" of communication are of vital importance. In this context, I have focused on the personification of co-constructed roles of central persons, and especially on the development of social psychic retreats such as ghettos and enclaves. I have stressed that massification is based on fundamentalism, and that when fundamentalism weakens, scapegoating people and sub-groupings develop.

It might be useful to provide here two tables that summarize the dimensions of incohesion with respect to the dimensions of the tripartite matrix (Tables 1 and 2). These tables are taken from my chapter in the book by Carla Penna about the study of large groups. (Carla is the new chairperson of the IAGP's Analytic Group Section).

Table 1. Some dimensions of a tripartite matrix and the sociocultural states of cohesion and incohesion of social systems.

Dimensions: Examples	Sociocultural states	
	Cohesion: the work group	**Incohesion: the basic assumption group**
Patterns of interpersonal relationships (the interaction system)	Integration	Unintegration
Patterns of values, norms, and beliefs (the normation system)	Solidarity	Insolidarity
Verbal and non-verbal communication	Coherence	Incoherence

Source: Hopper, E. (2023).

Table 2. Some properties of the sociocultural states of incohesion: aggregation/massification of social systems in terms of some dimensions of the tripartite matrix.

Dimensions: Examples	Sociocultural states of incohesion	
	Aggregation	**Massification**
Patterns of interaction: Patterns of interpersonal relationships (the interaction system) **UNINTEGRATION/DISINTEGRATION**	• Market exchange • Many isolates and singletons	• Anonymization • Many "membership individuals"
Patterns of normation: Patterns of values, norms and beliefs (the normation system) **INSOLIDARITY**	• Anomie (forms of) • Low morale • Diversity of cultural products	• Nomie (forms of) • Pseudomorale • Homogenization of signifiers (a bagel is only a roll with a hole)
Patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication: **INCOHERENCE**	• "Bureaucratese" • Jargon • Experimental music	• Cult speak • Speaking in tongues • Celebratory identity music

Source: Hopper, E. (2023).

I assume that unconsciously organizations such as prisons and even the therapeutic communities within them struggle to deal with the vicissitudes of incohesion. This is likely the major challenge to the administration of these social entities, and to the delivery of their work group mission. Although this challenge exists in all such institutions throughout the world, societies vary in the severity of it, and in the ability and willingness to manage the dynamics involved. For example, in the same way that societies vary in their normative orientations towards the exercise of authority and towards the expression of feelings generally and aggressive feelings in particular, not to mention variations in normative gender identity and the structures of masculinity and femininity. Societies also vary in the commonality of violence and sadism, the acceptance of criminality, the acceptance of ideas of sociogenesis of mental illness, etc. In any case, I am confident that in those social

entities in which traumatic experience is prevalent, the dynamics of incohesion are ubiquitous. Therefore, we must always be alert to the development of fundamentalism and scapegoating.

Among the topics that Kaori has brought to our attention, topics that I wish we had more time to discuss, there are the nature of secular hope and its more mature forms, not only religious hope, on the one hand, or infantile/pie-in-the-sky hope, on the other. Secular hope is a function of being able and willing to exercise the transcendent imagination, that is, how to make a situation "better," which under some circumstances can border on illusional—if not delusional—thinking. Secular hope is important in any discussion of rehabilitation and of imprisonment for life. It is quite a challenge to live with realism without hope! If not of the individual prisoners who are featured in Kaori Sakagami's films, consider the vengeful preoccupations of the Count of Monte Cristo, who was wrongly and unjustly imprisoned.

We must not neglect the topic of paternal functions and the Father himself, virtually as a Jungian archetype combining masculinity of the "boy" with the wisdom of the "elder," the ability and willingness to charm, as well as to contain and to rescue. It is not accidental that in so many religions and societies the ultimate God head is a Father figure. Afterall, the lessons of the New Testament are derived from those of the Old Testament, as well as from Greek philosophy.

Conflicts of interest

Nothing to declare.

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About the author

Earl Hopper, PhD (1940–2025), was a sociologist, psychoanalyst, groupanalyst, and organisational consultant. He served as President of the International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes and was a Distinguished Fellow of the American Group Psychotherapy Association, as well as an Honorary Member of the Group Analytic Society International and the Institute of Group Analysis. His influential contributions include seminal work on the social unconscious, the formulation of the tripartite matrix and the fourth basic assumption, and the analysis of organisational trauma, developed in part through his role as series editor of *The New International Library of Group Analysis*.