Article

Boundary Objects and Group Analysis: Between Psychoanalysis and Social Theory

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This paper explores possible connections between recent developments in social theory and group analysis, which could also have consequences for the conceptualization of group-analytic practice. Drawing on discussions from the sociology of scientific knowledge, specifically studies in sciences and technology, I offer an account and partial appropriation of some features of actor network theory. The concept of 'boundary object' is explored, through an attention to potential psychodynamic readings of these ideas and application to psychotherapeutic contexts. I also explore the interpretive potential of such frameworks to group-analytic approaches, in terms of offering analytic tools for the conceptualization of its practice within material, discursive and political contexts.

Key words: actor network theory, social studies of technology, transitional object, translation, Winnicott

> This clinical fragment illustrates the value of keeping in mind the distinctions that exist between phenomena in terms of their position in the area between external or shared reality and the true dream. (Winnicott, 1974: 30)

> [I]n which kinds of situation in the world are which kinds of people being forced to find language they didn't have before the encounter? So what's the implication of that for learning how to make connections for more livable worlds, which after all is a fundamentally moral and political commitment? It's that kind of imagination of livable worlds which precedes the knowledge-making practices. (Haraway, in Harvey and Haraway, 1995: 517–18)

Both statements come from outside group analysis – yet arguably they capture something of the group-analytic project. The first is how Winnicott (1974) ends his essay on 'transitional objects'; whilst the feminist historian of science, Haraway, speaks about her vision of contemporary political possibilities. Using the terms of my analysis – and in sympathy with current group-analytic proposals (Dalal, 1998; Hopper, 2002; Stacey, 2000; 2001) – perhaps we could see group analysis as a technology that fosters a translation or articulation of these different arenas. Alternatively, my account could be regarded as a 'boundary object' producing such possible convergences of diverse resources and interests.

Either way, if Winnicott's 'true dream' is seen as a social-utopian project – that is, as concerned with political as well as personal change – then group analysts must treat his 'shared reality' as not only 'external'. Rather his specification of the 'position in the area between' provokes reflection on the spatiality of our practices, inviting a close attention to their material practice within specific times and specific institutional-political locations. This notion of an 'area between' has clinical as well as conceptual applications, whilst 'keeping in mind the distinctions' i.e. not equating the two disciplines, or rendering them equivalent.

Some Playful/Material Beginnings

I have long been struck by the ways that, in group analysis, we are familiar with how artefacts, material objects located in time and space, fulfil specific dynamic purposes. Whilst some of the meanings these artefacts hold are inevitably idiosyncratic (and much therapeutic work is devoted precisely to amplify this), others are not only held in common but are so ritualized as to define and produce our shared therapeutic domains; indeed, they serve to distinguish group-analytic from other forms of therapeutic or organizational practice.

Doors, chairs and tables form the stock in trade of discussion within the group-analytic groups. Within training contexts, referral letters and case notes form more highly textualized, but no less mediated, entities that are not only produced through such material forms but are also affected by the specific forms of materiality involved. We might even say that these entities are not only invested by group-analytic participants with meanings, but themselves *effect* certain meanings. Here we come close to some of the

preoccupations of a particular strand of sociology that, since the 1970s, has been concerned with the ways technology structures social relations: actor network theory and its associated debates in social theory, cultural studies and social studies of technology.[1]

This exploration of some connections and juxtapositions between group analysis and sociology of technology studies is not with an aim of building some overarching theory that will enable harmonious continuity or compatibility between these diverse disciplines. Indeed, the emergence of selective points of convergence that do *not* imply a more general commensurability not only form my explicit topic, but also relate to the form of my argument, which is to offer some comments on some curious terminological resonances that invite reflection. My contention is that both group analysis and the areas of social theory that have engaged with social studies of technology notions have something to gain from this reflective juxtaposition.

So my project is 'playful' in the sense that it is open and exploratory, rather than being goal-directed, and motivated by a sense of curiosity for what happens in its process rather than a commitment to a specific endpoint. This 'playfulness' also extends to a sense of intrigue about what happens when two very different intellectual and practical frameworks are put into some relation with each other as an effect also of the combining of my own academic and therapeutic backgrounds.

As a starting point I suggest that we might 'play' a little with that key British psychoanalytic theorist of play, Winnicott. In his pathbreaking essay elaborating the notion of 'transitional objects' as intermediate between the internal and external, Winnicott identifies how groups, including forms of art, culture and religion, are formed on the basis of shared illusions (1974: 3). His account is reminiscent of Foulkes (1986) in the constitutive role accorded the cultural/ foundation matrix. Winnicott argues: 'the term "transitional object", according to my suggestion, gives room for the process of being able to accept difference and similarity' (pp. 6–7). The 'common experience between members of a group' (p. 16) in this account arises from 'overlapping' 'intermediate areas' – that, significantly, are not too closely challenged or scrutinized either for identity or objectivity. It would appear that, insofar as Winnicott offers a theory of groups, this is it. This claim that the origins of transitional objects must remain uninterrogated by tacit agreement is expanded upon in the essay. What it presumes, though, is that difference is

something that can only be covertly allowed, rather than being a constitutive characteristic of all relations that must be explicitly formulated. Here group analysis offers some useful departures.

Foulkes (1986) recommended the formation of groups according to a principle of heterogeneity, thereby allowing the emergence and contestation of group illusions to be a focus of study rather than a precondition of group formation. By such means we open up for interrogation the negotiation and struggle over group norms, rather than presuming the resolution of such contests through presumed, and thereby naturalized, culturally dominant social structures. In this sense group analysts, like other social theorists, have been concerned with precisely the same set of questions that have concerned practitioners of social studies of technology (Law, 1991). These are: questions of epistemology (the character of knowledge; which knowledge to draw upon and the problem of the privileged status accorded 'scientific' knowledge); difference (heterogeneity; hybridity); and distribution (power and exchange).

What relevance might the notion of 'boundary object' arising from social studies of technology have for psychodynamic analysis, especially after Winnicott's (1974) account of 'transitional objects'? What does it mean that social studies of technology (and after this, now much social theory) is concerned with questions of 'communication', 'language', 'exchange' and especially notions of 'network' and 'translation' – all key terms within a Foulkesian group-analytic lexicon?

Whilst some of these resonances may derive from features of their common origins – within Critical Theory (of the Frankfurt school), I suggest that group analysis might learn from more recent developments in negotiating its distinctive identity and orientation, in particular that there may be resources mobilized in this process for helping explicate and enlarge group-analytic perspectives.

Non-human Actors?

Psychoanalysis is very apt at deconstructing the human/non-human dichotomy. Its key concepts and technical practices can be said to function as technologies of subjectivity[2] that are both psychical and real in their effects. At its broadest, the notion of 'object relations' addresses this, describing the psychic uses to which we put representations of our relations of others. But perhaps we have stopped short. Freud (1921) highlighted how abstract ideas can form

the basis of identifications, as much as specifically embodied individuals. The emergence, impact and significance of such joint (if shifting) representations have formed a key focus for, and contribution of, group analysis – ranging from the metaphors of the group as an interactive space beyond the mere sum of individual members, to the gendered, classed and racialized (and other more explicitly 'politicized') features that the group inevitably (re)produces.

There are other intellectual convergences. Michael (1997) argues for actor network theory as a compatible intellectual resource to complement contemporary social constructionist social psychology, which has significant connections with group analysis. He highlights how actor network theory, by focusing on small-scale processes, offers specific analyses of innovation and change, rather than condemning social actors merely to reproduce structurally-determined relations. Both actor network theory and group analysis, then, deal with matters of identity and change within specific organizational systems. Actor network theory has elaborated a whole lexicon of terms to document and analyse the moves in this process, including enrolment, translation, association and interest.

One key element of actor network theory is its status as a *methodology* that sets out to interpret the interactions and negotiations across diversities of position and assumes radical divergence or dissimilarity of starting points, including structural positions. In Callon's (1986) classic study of the relations between scientists, researchers and the fishing community of St. Brieuc Bay, biologists who were attempting to develop techniques for cultivating the scallop, *Pecten Maximus*, in order to restock the Bay constructed an 'actor network' according to which they represented the roles of the component actors: the fishermen, positioned as the primary interest party in the restocking; the scallops which were represented through scientific techniques as potentially cultivable, and the scientific community represented through the delegate status accorded the biologists (after Michael, 1997: 328–9).[3] Whilst addressed to the analysis of the interface between scientific and policy-oriented work, this 'actor network' has been taken up and elaborated in more contemporary social theory to address more diverse and everyday circumstances.

What happens if we accord agencies to entities, rather than seeing these as only effects of the projections with which they are invested? After all, when a group analyst chooses a circular rather

than a square table, s/he is acknowledging that certain properties of the table are likely to elicit certain kinds of responses. Equally, the efforts many analysts put into collecting a uniform group of chairs reflects some understanding of how any differences (in height, comfort, colour, or condition etc.) will come into focus as a representation of other differences (e.g. status) between group members. In particular, the door as a boundary marking the space of the group is as significant in structuring the forms of social relations occurring around it as it is in keeping out the draughts and holding in the heat.

Here Latour's (1988) analysis of how what he calls a 'humble' artefact, an automatic (hydraulic) door-closer, functions as a moral, social actor in the structuring of relationships comes to mind. Taking various scenarios prompted by the example of what happens when the 'door-closer' fails to work, and the written notice that announces this, Latour[4] elaborates a new vocabulary to describe the interpenetration of technical and human relationships.[5] Developing his interpretation, we might say that the group-analytic door functions as a therapeutic 'delegate' to do particular analytical work for us; herein lies its moral and analytical status as an actor. The fact that we cannot imagine conducting analysis without demarcatable spaces for designated periods of undisturbed privacy speaks volumes about the cultural-historical conditions, and corresponding spatio-temporal features, that we presuppose in our practice.[6] Latour ends with an appeal for the extension of the sociological to study nonhumans:

> . . . what defines our social relations is, for the most part, prescribed back to us by non-humans. Knowledge, morality, craft, force, sociability are not properties of humans but of humans *accompanied by* their retinue of delegated characters. Since each of those delegates ties together part of our social world, it means that studying social relations without the nonhumans is impossible. . . To the people and ordinary folks should now be added the lively, fascinating and honorable ordinary mechanism. (Latour, 1988: 310, emphasis in original)

Clearly, with the advent of the widespread access to new information technologies, we are now more aware of the mediated character of relationships (Gordo-Lopez and Parker, 1999). But such a focus on the longstanding and mundane ways in which we live our lives in relation to, and through, technologies affords new perspectives on therapeutic processes (see Weinberg, in prep). Play therapy takes the material-as-symbolic very seriously. Winnicott uses string in offering a case example of transitional objects:

. . . string can be looked upon as an extension of all other techniques of communication. String joins, just as it also helps in the wrapping up of objects and in the holding of unintegrated material. In this sense string has a symbolic meaning for everyone. (Winnicott, 1974: 22)

Taking another technology, how might we understand the role of money, constituted as an actor in the network of therapeutic communication? Or diagnostic categories and instruments? Through an analysis of the precise delegations and networks implied (both apparently direct, as in private practice, or indirect through health authorities and the like), we might better grasp the complex communication networks which produce, constrain and co-ordinate therapeutic practice. Hence de-naturalizing and re-distributing the non/human binaries might prompt interesting re-framings of notions of transference, investment and projection.

Boundary Objects: Between Psychoanalysis and Group Analysis

The term 'boundary object' is itself a hybrid notion that has recently emerged within social theory. Yet it is striking that[7] (to my knowledge) this fertile and interesting concept has not been inflected with a psychodynamic reading of either the notion of 'boundary' or 'object'. Psychoanalytically speaking, boundaries mark psychical limits of specific kinds which, whilst inscribed within the consulting room, resolve into the demarcation of specific embodied individuals (hence the psychic significance accorded skin as a boundary, e.g. Bick, 1968). In group analysis we spend much time instilling a group culture which observes certain boundaries that, whilst transcending individual bodies, also produces a group-level interiority that is different for each member. Foulkes (1990: 173) identifies 'boundary incidents' as occurring 'when patients clearly, if unconsciously, indicate when and how outer life links up with the ongoing treatment situation'. For Winnicott, however, transitional objects are not in themselves transitional, but conceived of as real, external things which acquire their transitional status via a form of subjective investment, marking '. . . the infant's transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as something outside and separate' (Winnicott, 1974: 17). They are thus somewhere between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality testing.[8]

There are problems in relating this concept to groups, perhaps

precisely because all group work relies on such phenomena occurring continuously. Perhaps this is why in group analysis we have a more elaborated vocabulary that includes not only 'resonance' and the group 'matrix' but also notions of 'location' and 'timing' to foster attention to the precise and intertwined individual and group character of such phenomena.

Foulkes treats 'location' from a gestalt perspective, using a musical metaphor that also foregrounds analysis of the form of the communication:

> Location presupposes the conductor becoming aware of the relevant phenomena. Thus he can divine the relevant key in which the group speaks at that moment. Only by talking back to the group in that same key can he hope to be understood relatively well. A simpler way of putting this is that the good conductor, the good therapist, talks back in the language in which things reach him, in the language current amongst the members of the group. (Foulkes, 1986: 131)

In this sense group analysis necessarily leads towards the material-embodied character of psychic life. Nevertheless, group analysis shares with psychoanalysis some assumptions that call for critical scrutiny as an account of group development and functioning. For groupwork is more than the historical and systemic amalgamation of individual sets of development; it creates its own unique but shared history. Hence dominant representations, such as the maternal metaphor, as an image of primordial merging can be regarded as a group achievement rather than as a psychic starting point (Burman, 2001; 2002). Thus attending to the more permeable positing of the outside/inside boundary has consequences for our analysis of the 'here and now' vs. 'there and then' relationships.

Boundary Objects: Between Science and Technology Studies and Group Analysis

Developments in social theory offer some clues about what can happen if we de-naturalize the initial status of the 'object' and instead treat its emergence and form as a (partially joint) outcome of group interaction. Star (1991) extends the Latour-Callon analyses of notions of 'interessement' as:

> the process of translating the images and concerns of one world into that of another, and then disciplining or maintaining that translation in order to stabilize a powerful network. The networks include people, the built environment, animals and plants, signs and symbols, inscriptions, and all manner of other things. They

purposely eschew divides such as human/nonhuman and technology/society. (pp. 32–3)

To take an example, Star and Griesemer (1989) address the negotiation of cooperation and difference structurally required and elaborated in creating the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology in California. They discuss how different constituencies involved managed to work across divergent viewpoints and create generalizable findings through two sets of activities: standardization of methods and the development of what they call 'boundary objects'. The boundary objects of natural history work arose through the collaboration of such diverse 'actors' as sponsors, academics, administrators and amateurs as they created representations of nature. These 'objects' therefore included:[9]

> specimens, field notes, museums and maps of particular territories. Their boundary nature is reflected by the fact that they are simultaneously concrete and abstract, specific and general, conventionalized and customized. They are often internally heterogeneous. (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 408)

Whilst in some respects an historical study, the authors claim this analysis has more general application for describing how diverse groups of actors work to maintain heterogeneity and cooperation whilst maintaining a focus on the impact of institutional agendas – all of which we might see as features central to group-analytic settings. Crucially, they suggest that the means for cooperation across different worlds emerges through the process of the work together: 'boundary objects act as anchors or bridges, however temporary' (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 414). Such 'bridges' are only ever partial and temporary, whilst the 'boundary' status of the object arises precisely by virtue of its position between worlds: 'the objects thus come to form a common boundary between worlds by inhabiting them both simultaneously' (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 412).[10]

Gordo-Lopez (1996: 172) summarizes three key characteristics of boundary objects:

> they can be both material (for example a database, protocols for gathering and analysing different data . . .) or conceptual (for example, gender stereotypes); secondly, they co-ordinate people, knowledge and technologies over time and space. They are helpful in analysing the ways interdisciplinary teams, knowledges and procedures function together in institutional settings . . . Thirdly, boundary objects are also valuable devices for analysing the way institutions handle and restrict variety. (p. 172)

Star and Griesemer offer a more extended definition:

> Boundary objects are objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several practices employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, and become strongly structured in individual-site use. These objects may be abstract or concrete. They have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognisable, a means of translation. The creation and management of boundary objects is a key process in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds. (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 393)

Boundary objects are thus a means of producing sufficient coherence to enable interaction without this being predicated on the erasure of heterogeneity; nor on the imposition of uniformity or transparency. Thus boundary objects offer a site or medium for the negotiation of identity and difference. Let us turn now to 'translation' in social theory and group analysis.

Translations, Exchange and Power
Foulkes (1986: 111) portrays translation as equivalent to analytic processes:

> All these processes can be looked upon together as if they are translations from one type of expression, from one language to another, from symptomatic and symbolic meaning to a clear understanding of what is at stake. In referring to the total processes we sometimes speak of 'translation'.

This comment invites application in several directions. One would be to elaborate more specifically linguistic readings of 'translation', connecting with other psychoanalytic accounts that specifically focus their account of 'the talking cure' in terms of the relation to language as a symbolic system. A second would be to materialize language as a socio-technical tool of 'expression'. This serves to explicate more of 'what is at stake' within the institutional relations as well as individual interests and enrolments: that is, highlighting the necessity of a theory of power relations. Developing both these ideas, a third line of argument would pose the question of whose clear understanding prevails, why and how? That is, who has the authority to claim clarity of understanding? Does the analyst need to lay claim to this 'god's-eye view' of group dynamics in order to fulfill his or her role, or does the analysis here invite other, more

partial and fragmentary, readings of group process, that are more consistent with Foulkes's characterization of analysis of the group, by the group, including the conductor?

The social studies of technology notion of 'translation' highlights the work of relationship and communication across a diversity of positions and interests in which convergence is partial – that is, not at the expense of imposing homogeneity:

> in addition to the translation work of creating abstract objects (lists of species, lists of factors) from concrete, conventionalised ones (locations, specimens, field notes), a series of increasingly abstract maps must be created which link these objects together. (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 406)

So one key issue foregrounded by boundary objects is how difference can be maintained alongside participation. Donna Haraway, a key exponent on human-technology relations and widely cited popularizer of the notion of the cyborg (Haraway, 1991), comments further on the broader utility of the notion of boundary objects:

> If you're in a world that's really disparate, radically disparate, kinds of socio-cultural – socio-temporal formations or life-worlds are in play, and are forced to be in play with each other – for example, consider the case of many sciences which require extensive interdisciplinarity, such as between engineers and software folks and physicians, who are literally forced to work with each other in order to achieve something, but who at a radical level do not share a common language or practices – there are certain kinds of entities which circulate among this community, call them boundary objects. Such objects are stabilized enough to travel recognizably among the different communities, but flexible enough to be moulded by these different communities of practice in ways that are close enough to what the practitioners already understand how to do, in order for them actually to do something. And so it's a way of modelling working together in a scene of radically different languages. (p. 516)

'Boundary objects', then, arise as 'plastic' but 'robust' linking entities across different sites; alongside practices of translation that produce new abstract entities from concrete, conventionalized ones. This seems very much like what happens in analytic groups when we say that a group image or dream has emerged, which becomes a shared vehicle for different group members to communicate their specific associations. Such representations are in principle limitless. Yet these translations maintain both autonomy and diversity. Hence translation is only ever partial (and perhaps there are connections here with Winnicott's comments on areas of avoidance of challenge?).

> Different social worlds maintained a good deal of autonomy in parallel work situations. Only those parts of the work essential to maintaining coherent information were pooled in the intersection of information; the others were left alone. Participants developed extremely flexible, heterogeneous economies of information and materials, in which needed objects could be bartered, traded, bought or sold. Such economies maximised the autonomy of work considerations in intersecting worlds while ensuring 'trade' across world boundaries. (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 404)

Such translations – or trade in communication – occur through necessity:

> What make these sorts of multiple translations happen is rarely goodwill and choice, but literally being forced into some kind of exchange relationship. (Haraway, in Harvey and Haraway, 1995: 517)

Thus each set of objects is not only an intersubjective achievement but testifies to '. . . the conflicts between the various participating worlds. In this sense each protocol is a record of the process of reconciliation' (Star and Griesemer, 1989: 407).

This is where we really come to the crucial issue of power, including how broader structural constraints enter into more local communicational networks. What limits the kinds of working models or boundary objects that gain circulation, and why do some prevail over others? Before we apply the analysis of boundary objects too glibly we should perhaps bear in mind Star and Griesemer's (1989) conclusions concerning the vulnerability and reflexive strategies of accommodation displayed by people whose socially anomalous positioning (e.g. around structures of sexuality or racialization) render them as boundary objects 'passing' through or connecting different domains.[11] Precisely because the dynamics of marginalization they highlight (should) become the focus of analysis within therapeutic groups, it may be that group analysis can draw usefully on this analysis.

Star (1991) develops this framework to transcend (or transgress) the human/non-human (or technological) divide (that she and her co-worker had re-inserted) to analyse the negotiation of multiplicity within human relationships and subjectivities. She focuses on standardization (as one key form of boundary object), as illuminated initially by the 'high tension zone' identified by her student, 'Jan', as s/he negotiates the in-between space of transgender – which is an area where such analyses of relations between technologies and subjectivity have been particularly useful (c.f. Foucault, 1981;

Gordo-Lopez, 1996). From this, she addresses a more mundane, apparently trivial, example of the reception and position of those who fail to 'fit' – in terms of the difficulty of buying a burger without onions, where the 'conventions' privilege some combination of possibilities over others so as to arbitrarily regulate and restrict them.

Conclusions: On Margins and Metaphors

> Because we are all members of more than one community of practice and thus of many networks, at the moment of action we draw together repertoires mixed from different worlds. Among other things, we create metaphors – bridges between those different worlds.
>
> Power is about whose metaphor brings worlds together, and holds them there. It may be a power of the zero-point or a power of discipline; of enrolment or affinity; it may be the collective power of non-splitting. Metaphors may heal or create, erase or violate, impose a voice or embody more than one voice . . . (Star, 1991: 52)

So where does this account connecting the diverse domains of group analysis and sociology of knowledge take us? Let me reiterate the tentative status of this account as supplementary to, rather than replacing, existing bodies of knowledge; offering additional vantage points for group analysis, as a social approach to working with the psyche in three possible directions.

First the reworking of the notions of both 'object' and 'boundary' in the light of these debates takes group analysis further in its project to elaborate a socially situated analysis. Whilst the concept of 'object' has a major psychoanalytic history, this currently carries associations of normative discussions of development, including notions of use ('ruth'-lessness) and structure, from which prescribed meanings are read. The conception elaborated in this paper departs from a historical model to emphasize how objects are current and contested productions, called into existence through the contextual demands (albeit produced from pre-existing resources). I suggest that this is consistent with much actual group-analytic practice. Similarly the representation of 'boundary' disrupts the container/contained metaphor in use within psychoanalytic approaches, linked to notions of dis/integration that, since they are inscribed within modern western models of subjectivity, are therefore partial and exclusionary in their account. Instead the analysis consists of mapping surfaces, forms of technology in use and trajectories across which encounters take place.

Second, this move to 'go spatial', i.e. to *situating* group-analytic practice, has longstanding resonance in Bion's (1947: 314) injunction to enter the psychotherapeutic encounter 'without memory or desire', and emphasizes the attention to performance/context. Far from being a denial of history, it invites new ways of understanding the mediations between public and private life that always involve culture, history and place. From this the dichotomy between the material and immaterial character of psychic life emerges as false, since the psychic is also always social; whilst the configurations connecting local and global become amenable for exploration through attending to the specific features of a social but internalized subjectivity, including also as internalized through technological representations (boundary objects) of therapy itself.

Moreover, and this is a key point, it provokes an attention to forms of language and communicative processes that is not premised upon a resolution of joint action as indicative of harmony/ consensus (which is the political problem with intersubjectivity models). The approach envisages the project of talk/communication across irreconcilable differences without smoothing out the presence of conflict and struggle. Instead what comes into focus is precisely the contest and (after Foulkes) what is at stake in this. Not only does this highlight the multiplicities of possible positions and outcomes, it also denaturalizes/normalizes the assumed technological status of boundary objects.

A key methodological as well as theoretical implication is to situate therapeutic talk within institutional (and other) contexts in ways that offer an attention to power relations – denaturalizating our disciplinary boundary objects to enable critical scrutiny of their metaphorical status. It offers a resource by which to bring renewed attention to how different stances/positions produce contrasting ways of interpreting language and arise from the intersection of many different languages.

Haraway discusses a dispute between Australian-English sheep pasturalists and aboriginal Australians over the common system of land possession, as a compelling example of where the power struggle is over the precise form of the metaphorical status of land:

> One group of people in the conversation understand that they are working with a heavily metaphorized set of concepts, in this case aboriginals, because they are used to different lineages of people literally possessing metaphors that in turn give some access to land rather than others. Whereas the English pasturalists

don't know they work with metaphors when they talk about contract. The self-indivisibility of the metaphoricity of contract is so deep, that the hard problem for the sheep herders is figuring out that they are working with metaphors at all. The hard problem for the aboriginals is to figure out that they don't necessarily own the metaphor once and for all, that metaphors can be transferred in destabilising ways that shape certain kinds of assumptions about land on their part. (Haraway, in Harvey and Haraway, 1995: 517)

So, I contend that the framework of boundary objects may be of analytical value to conceptualize the multiple and contested positions of both researchers and group analysts as actors negotiating diverse political terrains – including complex organizational and policy agendas.[12] This analytic device might enable us more easily to evaluate our individual and unique trajectories as intersecting within organizational landscapes. It has the potential to rework the terrain that we typically understand in terms of notions of identity and identification in vital new directions. In this sense new alliances are opened up in reciprocal directions between group analysis and social theory, as well as fostering connections with other therapeutic approaches, e.g. connecting narrative/discursive approaches to therapy – traditionally non-psychoanalytic – with a group-analytic reworking of psychodynamics via the shared focus on language/translation issues.

Third, there are connections with analysis that draw attention to the broader political evaluation of our metaphorical constructs. Star (1991) elaborates a key methodological precept: to start from the position of (what she calls) the 'zero-point' to highlight those features of interpretive frameworks that are assumed (or 'stabilized'). She advocates this not simply to improve such technologies, but to highlight their normative assumptions:

[T]here is a question about where to begin and where to be based in our analyses of standards and technologies. If we begin with the zero point . . . we enter a high tension zone which may illuminate the properties of the more conventionalized, standardized aspects of those networks which are stabilized for many . . . Those . . . who resist delegation. . . are a good point of departure for our analysis because they remind us that, indeed, it might have been otherwise. (p. 53)

Notes

1 My engagement with these arenas owes an enormous amount to working with both Angel Gordo-Lopez and Rose Capdevila – who merit specific acknowledgement.

2 The resonance here to Foucault's work, especially to his later analysis in these terms (e.g. Foucault, 1988) is intentional.

3 The fishermen went on to betray the scientists by fishing to the point of decimating the scallop beds. Callon's analysis considers how and why the identities of all the actors could survive only whilst each of them in the network played their allotted part, elaborating the notions of 'translation' and 'interessement' to account for the creation and factors affecting the sustainability of novel 'texts of identity', such as those by which the fishermen were 'enrolled'.

4 Or rather, highlighting his own constructed/technological characteristics, he writes as his 'author-in-the-text', 'Jim Johnson' (see Latour, 1988: note 11).

5 These include 'scripts' (scenes or scenarios played by human or nonhuman actors, either figurative or non-figurative), whilst he characterizes as 'description' the retrieval of the script from the situation. The 'translation' of script from one repertoire to a more durable form, i.e. 'from a provisional and less reliable one to a longer-lasting and more faithful one' (p. 306), he calls 'transcription'; whilst, interestingly inflecting this term with history and culture, 'translation here does not have here only its linguistic meaning but also the religious one, 'translation of the remains of St Christel', and the artistic one, 'translating the feelings of Calder into bronze' (p. 306). To avoid the kind of human/non-human dichotomies implied by sociological notions such as 'role expectations', he offers terms such as 'prescription' and 'inscription', which when infracted he offers as 'des-inscription', and where conformed to, 'subscription'.

6 That is, that therapy is a modern, urban practice.

7 With the exception of Gordo-Lopez (1995)

8 In therapeutic practice gifts often are often conceived of as transitional objects, but understanding the specificity of their meanings and function within the therapeutic relationship alongside all the cultural-historical practices around a gift economy has meant that it is impossible to ascribe general interpretations of gift-giving, or guidelines around how to respond to them (see Spandler *et al*., 2000). Further analysis of gift-giving in group contexts might be particularly informative in relation to the topic of this paper.

9 They distinguish four kinds of 'boundary objects' – (1) 'repositories' ('ordered "piles" of objects indexed in a standardized fashion and built to deal with problems of heterogeneity caused by differences in unit of analysis.) It has the advantage of modularity'; (2) 'ideal types' (an object such as a diagram or atlas which does not accurately describe the details of any locality or thing.) It is abstracted from all domains, and may be fairly vague, which makes it adaptable; it serves as a means of communicating and cooperating symbolically'; (3) 'coincident boundaries' ('common objects that have the same boundaries but different internal forms . . . The result is that work in different sites and with different perspectives can be conducted autonomously whilst cooperating parties share a common referent. The advantage is the resolution of different goals.'); and, (4) standardized forms (devised as methods of common communication across dispersed work groups.) The advantages of such objects are that local uncertainties (for example in the collecting of animal species) . . . are deleted.' (drawn from Star and Griesemer, 1989: 410–11)

10 There are shades of connection here with Stacey's complexity theory account of group analysis whereby 'emergence and coherence arising in the interaction itself' (2001: 229) gives rise to 'identities of the whole and of the entities constituting it at the same time' (p. 231). Whilst Stacey's focus is on re-working

part-whole relations and identity, drawing on notions on 'self-reference, self-organization and emergence, radical unpredictability and paradox' (2000: 513) to offer an account of both stability and novelty, he articulates this via an intersubjectivity model. However the analysis here would indicate other, perhaps more compatible resources for this project.

11 Star and Griesemer (1989: 412) write:

> In conducting collective work, people coming together from different social worlds frequently have the experience of addressing an object that has a different meaning for each of them. Each social world has partial jurisdiction over the resources represented by that object, and mismatches caused by the overlap become problems for negotiation. Unlike the situation of marginal people who reflexively face problems of identity and membership, however, the objects with multiple memberships do not change themselves reflexively, or voluntarily manage membership problems. While these objects have some of the same properties as marginal people, there are crucial differences.
>
> For people, managing multiple memberships can be volatile, elusive or confusing; navigating in more than one world is a non-trivial mapping exercise. People resolve problems of marginality in a variety of ways: by passing on one side or another, denying one side, oscillating between worlds, or by forming a new social world composed of others like themselves.

12 Whilst this application was inspired by working with Angel Gordo-Lopez (1995; 1996), it also owes much to my work with Helen Spandler (2002), whose doctoral research in therapeutic communities identified how intersecting theoretical and political frameworks produced certain specific and incommensurable positions for her as a researcher interacting with staff and patients that neither other party could quite access. The effect of this positioning as a 'boundary object' was that she was both the medium for communication/contiguity between parties as embodied but not transparent or standardized 'translation' device, but also was unable to 'assimilate' into either group.

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Commentary on 'Boundary Objects and Group Analysis' by Erica Burman

Dieter Nitzgen

What do we mean when we speak of networks in group analysis? What exactly are we talking about? Foulkes himself had been prudent enough, it seems, to define the group's 'matrix' as a 'hypothetical web of communication' (Foulkes, 1990: 180), leaving the question of the nature of its agents or 'actors' suspended. Although he insisted on the relevance of the group's material environment including the chairs for its unfolding dynamics, this is not really elaborated conceptually in his work. Therefore, it is not surprising at all that following generations of group analysts have tended to understand group networks primarily in terms of human relating, implicitly reducing them to 'human relations'. This holds true even for some of the most advanced attempts at reformulating group-analytic theory – like, for instance, Stacey's intersubjectivity model. When he claims the group's 'emergence and coherence' to arise 'in the interaction itself' (2001: 29), an interaction that is originally based on 'gestures', the group's evolving network is being reduced to the actions of explicitly 'human' actors.

In contrast to this and contesting similar views, Erica Burman has