Special issue: Editorial Introduction

Group Analysis Special Issue New Currents in Contemporary Social Theory and Implications for Group-Analytic Theory and Practice

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Introduction

This Special Issue explores implications for group analysis of current debates in social theory. It aims to bring creative and dynamic currents, which have recently invigorated approaches to method and interpretation within the social and human sciences, into dialogue with those of group analysis. While the range of such approaches are so diverse as to scarcely allow for a common title, what might be called the 'post-foundationalist paradigm' (broadly including poststructuralist, postmodernist, performative and post-colonial ideas) in contemporary social theory has prompted both new preoccupations and alternative perspectives on old problems – problems of individual and collective meaning, and subjectivities. *Group Analysis* has certainly featured some of these frameworks and highlighted possible applications (e.g. Craib, 2001), and this issue builds on these to identify and introduce specific areas or fields of newly emerging inquiry that are currently transforming the conceptual landscape of social theory. These have key implications as to how we formulate contexts of distress and usher in alternative interpretive approaches to therapeutic, and other group-analytic, work.

The Special Issue takes the form of six specially commissioned articles by experts in their field, drawn from a range of disciplines, each of whom addresses a key perspective that has emerged from the recent 'textual' turn in social theory. Each paper outlines the

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conceptual challenges and opportunities initiated by the framework under consideration, in particular focusing on the resources this offers for the reconfiguration of (the diverse forms of) power relations in both research and practice. A key theme or current arena of debate within contemporary social theory forms the focus for analysis of each paper: feminisms, postcolonial theory, queer theory, narrative analysis, translation and space. Each paper describes why and how this approach has arisen, explains the new perspectives on methodological and interpretive issues it has instigated, and the areas of tension and convergence with other current perspectives.

The papers address a related set of themes, designed to apply to distinct areas of concern. To begin with, it is worth recalling that group analysis has historical connections with critical theory, dating from Foulkes's own work in Frankfurt in the 1920s (E. Foulkes, 1990; Rothe, 1989). In this sense this issue is merely updating a longstanding relationship. While the Frankfurt School (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979) formulated the initial critiques of the enlightenment project (in the form of 'reason', 'science', 'history'), post World War II social theory (e.g. Lyotard, 1982) extended these further in response to global changes in communication technologies and capitalism (indicated, for example, by the ways multinational corporations are now more financially and sometimes politically important than single nation states – as in the role of oil companies in the 2004 Iraq conflict). As Harvey (1989) notes, the condition of postmodernity reflects the changing relations of time and space (of proximity, distance, and speed), and how our social relationships (including those of work, friendship and family) are transformed by these.

Norbert Elias is clearly a key figure connecting the two sets of intellectual currents. As well as linking group analysis and social theory, his work additionally functioned within sociology to provide a critique of dominant structuralist and adaptationist paradigms and to assert the need to attend to process, including language, culture and the changing material tools available to mediate social relations – i.e. technology. Indeed it may be significant that Elias was a relative late-comer to sociology, first training in medicine and then philosophy before arriving at the conviction that only sociology could provide the answers to his preoccupations. These were with socialized embodiment and the societal management of aggression, explicitly aiming to build on Freud's key work in this area, but to

ground it within a deeper understanding of changing social processes (Elias, 1994). Although he is little referred to in the papers within this Special Issue, Elias – in his analytical rigour and the sustained critical inquiry that prompted his cross-disciplinary investigations – lives on in this enterprise. Hence this issue arises from the sense of value for group analysts of multidisciplinary dialogue, and the need to maintain connection with more recent innovations in social theory that extend the scope of such analysis, and bring new themes and dimensions to the fore.

Given the shared history it is not surprising that commonalities can be drawn between such developments and group-analytic concerns. Broadly speaking, the 'post-foundational' turn in social theory can be characterized as having three key, connected preoccupations. Firstly, the challenge to received authority (including that of science and reason) and history has given rise to an understanding of knowledge as *perspectival*, that is, as structured according to particular historical and cultural contexts which make it more difficult to privilege one perspective over others. This acknowledgement of the situated and reflexive character of all knowledge claims has been most forcefully articulated within social theory by feminist critiques, as also reflected in their place here in this issue. Clearly, group analysis presumes perspective as its mode of practice (through the juxtaposition of the perspectives of group members), alongside exploration of the (counter) transferential investments within those perspectives. The first paper offers further resources to explore why and in what ways gender or 'sexual' difference has been treated as the main axis of difference within group analysis, drawing on psychoanalysis, both in terms of current relationships and models of psychic development. Is it time to re-evaluate this priority? Or, what does it tell us about the presuppositions of our dominant models?

Reworking received history by reading it symptomatically, against the grain, reveals the hidden role of colonialism and imperialism as structuring modern Western thought – with psychoanalysis as no exception. Hence cultural differences, and their relative hierarchy through legacies of colonialism, are typically subordinated to gender – in the sense that they are treated as less important, or else they enter covertly within models of mental health and distress in terms of classed and racialized definitions of 'psychological mindedness'. Rarely do we consider how gendered and colonialist assumptions work together within the description of

femininity offered by Freud as the 'dark continent'. Yet beyond even these critiques, as Amal Treacher indicates in the second paper in the issue, postcolonial theory has emerged as a vital interpretive resource that in turn situates the dominant paradigms of critical theory circulating within the west in relation to its dynamically invested others. Psychoanalytic theory and practice has been usefully applied to understand the position of the colonized subject, most notably by Fanon, (1968, 1990, 1992) while there are new generations of critical analysts and activists whose experiences of migration, exile, cultural dispossession and hybridity have brought forth a whole new vocabulary of cultural practice opened up by Said's (1978) account of 'orientalism'. Such practices live on in cultural and economic forms through enduring centre/periphery relations. Yet rather than seeing culture as unifying or integral, Treacher portrays contemporary (dominant and subaltern) cultural practices as plural, fragmented, contested and always changing, and with power relations – as in those between the (formerly or currently) colonized and the colonizers – always at play. For group analysis, postcolonial theory can offer quite a sharp challenge around assumptions of what can be achieved when people meet; it may be, that the terrain is already substantially 'fixed' by history.

The papers identified so far illustrate a second key theme of (what we have called) post-foundationalist social theory: the move *from identity to performance*. For rather than focusing on matters of identity, they privilege the process or context in which such identifications happen, the arenas of activity that enable or constrain the affirmation of particular allegiances or designations. While the concept of identity has been central to humanist thinking, its conceptual trappings have privileged representations of subjectivity that are overly static and integrated (which we might further note are considerably at odds with psychoanalytic conceptions of psychic functioning – including notions of the unconscious). Moreover, humanist conceptions of identity have attracted criticism for their spurious universalist claims, indirectly privileging Western (bourgeois and usually culturally masculine) qualities and values and inappropriately applying them as if they were relevant everywhere and in the same way.

Perhaps the key arena that has brought performative approaches on to the intellectual and political agenda is queer theory. As Katherine Watson outlines in her paper 'Queer Theory', the third article in this issue, this is an approach that explicitly refuses or

problematizes notions of (gendered and sexed) identity and instead presses us to consider what lies behind the need for such fixities (to safely consign dispreferred forms of pleasure to marginalized/pathologized places, for example). Notwithstanding their widespread currency, categories of gender identity and sexual orientation are not 'natural' or self-evident but rather they have a history and context of emergence within western culture. Indeed they arose with the emerging (social) sciences of medicine, sociology and psychology, and alongside societal processes of secularization that – in Foucault's (1980) famous analysis – rendered psychoanalysis into the 'secular confessional'. These source disciplines for group analysis share a deep commitment to a notion of an inner, stable self, a sense of a 'space inside' or interiority that can be inspected and reflected upon. It is this notion that underlies the group-analytic discourse of therapy and change. Indeed this 'self' fits with modern forms of government as invested in nation-states, through the rational, self-regulating citizen who voluntarily subscribes to its rules and is accountable for them (Rose, 1990). Yet what 'Queer Theory' invites us to do is to destabilize that identity or self – and not only in relation to matters of gender or sexuality, although such notions run so deep in our current sense of selfhood that they are certainly a good place to start. They highlight activity and performance rather than identity as a political strategy to subvert unhelpful, and unhelpfully static designations.

Group analysis has tended to highlight questions of identity, and clearly notions of belonging figure in important ways in all our work and lives. The challenge posed by queer theory is how to ask different questions that are less interested in the achievement of a (group or individual) identity as an endstate or possession, and more concerned with the process or activity that elicits this. Indeed group analysis – as a medium of guided change – is necessarily a performative approach, for it aims to foster contexts that thwart the compulsion to repeat and that enable the doing of things differently, and reflection upon how they can be done differently.

The third, related theme within social theory is the attention to *textuality*, especially language. Once we see our knowledge claims as (after Wittgenstein) language games, or forms of cultural practice, then we can start to scrutinize those practices and evaluate them for their cultural and political adequacy – hence feminist, postcolonial and queer theory's critiques of the dominant practices surrounding culture, gender and sexuality. There is no neutral

medium of expression, and all languages or signifying practices carry some such psycho-social legacies (indeed, psychoanalytically speaking, the entry into language is itself a key structuring moment for gender and cultural relations). Rather than claim a spurious neutrality or transcendence (of the sort unsuccessfully demanded by 'science'), social theory has focused on forms of expression or modes of communication: their textualities and the forms of social relations they prefer or disallow. In this context, narrative approaches have become increasingly important in terms of the form and relations presumed by certain kinds of account-giving and hearing, and as informing the cultural bedrock that enables such communication to take place. Like psychoanalysis, group analysis is a 'talking cure', and we stand to gain much from learning about other forms of analysis of talk that are currently in circulation. Corinne Squire's succinct introduction to the current field highlights areas of connection and convergence between narrative work and group analysis, as well as distinguishing some points of difference.

Taking the theme of language and textuality further, within social theory the attention to the mediated and motivated character of all meaning systems has significantly challenged the assumption of transparent communication. Once again we can see connections here with therapeutic analysis, and specifically with group analysis – since communicative exchange (or the analysis of obstacles in the way of this!) is its key mode of practice. The fourth paper in the issue, by Alexandra Zavos, discusses how we might view translation – from one language to another – as a methodology for the exploration of the construction and misconstrual of meaning. The distortions, and their consequences, matter. She topicalises her own positioning as fluent Greek-English bilingual to explore questions of emotional connection and communication that such fluency belies. Translation studies is now a burgeoning area within social theory, informed by postcolonial, feminist and cultural criticism. The specificities of culture are expressed within particular languages in ways that elude 'direct' translation. Rather than (only) trying to bridge such communicative gaps, attending to questions of translation can perhaps help us to 'mind' them, to think more about their meaning – in terms of their personal and interpersonal significance, and beyond this to the overarching questions of power that determine which languages are privileged and how others get heard. Zavos attempts to convey some of this struggle through the

adoption of different narrative voices (albeit here writing only in English), without forcing their harmonization or continuity. Translation issues have been addressed in various ways within the pages of *Group Analysis* (not least in the impressive study undertaken by Kennard et al., 2002), but such treatments can perhaps now be enriched by the more conceptual – if also affectively charged – account provided by Zavos in her call to hear the text itself as a translator of the issues of which it speaks.

The final theme from social theory we highlight here is that of space. Conceptions of space clearly underlie all the notions we have been using so far – for performance occurs within specific arenas whose spatial qualities demand analysis, and perspective implies a particular location. The connection with location should remind us of the longstanding and deep involvement of group analysis in notions of space, not least the definition of the 'group-analytic situation' as relying upon the elaboration of certain boundaried spaces. Within social theory, geography has gained a new pre-eminence by virtue of its attention to the *particular*. While historical analyses have been subject to criticism for typically privileging direction over state – imposing some kind of developmental or progressive hierarchy, geographical analyses have offered new insights and analytical tools to attend to the implicit and explicit contexts of our inquiries. Liz Bondi, writing as both feminist geographer and practising counsellor, highlights the common conceptual concerns of psychodynamic and geographical practices, showing how the spatial terms mobilized within psychoanalytic discourse typically remain unanalysed. In some ways this paper may cover the ground that is most familiar to a group-analytic audience; but the intellectual challenges and resources it offers are perhaps correlatively even more significant because of this. Bondi's paper offers some important examples of how attention to 'place' and 'position' within the framework of 'relational space' might inform understandings of forms of distress and properties of therapeutic contexts.

True to group-analytic practice, this Special Issue is structured according to a process of dialogue and debate between social theorists and group analysts, so that each paper is commented upon by two experienced group analysts who evaluate the relevance and implications for group-analytic theory and practice of each of the contributions. Much of the argument here reflects a tension between these new frameworks and the traditions of group analysis; it is our

hope that the *lack* of resolution to be found here will highlight these frameworks as conceptual resources for group analysis – offering further perspectives for reflection and debate, rather than technique or doctrine. Here we might recall Elias's (2000) central contention concerning the role of language and culture in structuring culturally-specific forms of 'civilization' or subjectivity – hence prompting the possibility of many diverse forms of group analysis according to contexts of emergence and practice. Our hope is also that they may inspire projects for further research that feel more compatible with group-analytic concerns than only evidence-based practice or audit studies.

It remains for us to thank the contributors to this issue for their (largely) prompt and always enthusiastic engagement in this work. We are only too aware of how hard it is to build dialogue across different disciplinary communities, let alone across the academic-practitioner divide (although some of us span both). As editors, we have made the academics work hard to make their accounts intelligible and useful to a group-analytic readership. The Commentaries have also included processes of re-evaluation and further discussion, including a level of critical appreciation that some of the authors reflect upon in their Responses. We hope that this – inevitably rather partial – collection marks a further step in fostering the continuing connections between group analysis and social theory, as a lively process of mutual debate and learning.

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