British Journal of Psychiatry (1991), **158**, 723–725

Reading About . . .

Group Psychotherapy

Since Bloch (1981) last wrote about the group psychotherapies for this journal, there have been significant developments in practice and in the available literature. There is now a wider range of introductory texts, and a few works have extended the theory of group dynamics and the therapeutic action of groups. There is evidence of a growing awareness of the applications of group psychotherapy in the treatment of a range of patients.

For the beginner who is looking for a short introduction, there are useful chapters in three well known books. Brown & Pedder's (1979) brief section on psychodynamic group psychotherapy is set in a clear text which outlines the general principles and practice of psychodynamic treatments. Whiteley & Gordon (1979) approach the subject from a more sociological perspective, offering a succinct summary of group dynamics and locating the small psychotherapy group in the wider setting of the therapeutic institution. Bloch's (1986) compact chapter addresses practical issues such as indications, selection and preparation of patients for group psychotherapy, and he illustrates typical developments in the life of a therapy group. I have explored the wider applications and implications of group processes in psychiatry (Hobbs, 1990).

Several books, both old and new, offer more extensive introductions to small-group psychotherapy. I was much influenced by Walton's (1971) slim text which, though now out of print, is still available in many libraries. This book offers the most concise outline of object relations psychology that I have ever read, and demonstrates its value in understanding group processes. Foulkes & Anthony's (1957) book, which has been reprinted, is still the most useful introduction to the group analytic perspective, giving a clear analysis of the nature of groups and the processes which occur within them.

Two recent books tackle the subject of group psychotherapy in contrasting styles. Wright's (1989) text was written for students undertaking an introductory course in psychodynamic group work, and offers perhaps the simplest introduction available today. He outlines the psychological development of the individual within the family and social network as a background from which to address the therapeutic properties of the group. Aveline & Dryden (1988) have edited a book which introduces the diverse range of group therapies practised in Britain today. There are clear chapters on analytic, interpersonal and cognitive behavioural group therapies, as well as valuable chapters on the therapeutic community, single-sex therapy groups and group therapy research.

Hinshelwood (1987), in his aptly titled *What Happens in Groups*, aims to establish a way of thinking about groups, communities and institutions in general, and therapeutic ones in particular. Whereas others have sought to understand the group in terms of individual psychodynamics, Hinshelwood applies his knowledge of groups to the individual. Kernberg (1980) has also written about the dynamic interaction between the individual and the group, and I have found particularly useful his succinct description of the impact on institutions of the leader's personality.

It is also important for today's student of group psychotherapy to be able to trace the emergence and development of the theory and principles which underlie current practice. Although Freud did not address the therapeutic application of the group, he did make astute observations of group dynamics in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921). The development of group psychotherapy in Britain was stimulated initially by the work of a small number of psychoanalysts during World War II. Bion's interest in the therapeutic application of groups was short-lived but his observations on the behaviour of groups of people remains salient today (Bion, 1961). Pines' (1985) compilation brings together some interesting observations on Bion's work and appraisals of the application of his theory of groups to understanding the dynamics of organisations and institutions. Foulkes (1948, 1964) derived his simple but comprehensive ideas from his work in therapeutic groups, and his books outline the historical and theoretical basis of group analysis. The continued evolution of this approach has been traced in another compilation edited by Pines (1983).

There is really no such thing as a manual of group psychotherapy, but there are books which are very useful practically to the group psychotherapist.

https://doi.org/10.1192/S000712500002403X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Yalom's *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (1985) has long been a valued reference for group therapists. It is extraordinarily comprehensive and offers useful practical advice to guide the therapist in many tricky situations. Yalom draws extensively on his own clinical experience and on accumulated findings from empirical research. The book forms an excellent summary of interpersonal group psychotherapy, a model derived from existential and humanistic traditions.

What Yalom has done for interpersonal group psychotherapy, Rutan & Stone (1984) have done for psychodynamic group psychotherapy. They address many of the technical aspects of group psychotherapy from a clear-cut psychodynamic perspective, and achieve a wonderfully lucid digest of the subject which offers wisdom without being prescriptive.

In very different style, Whitaker (1985) has written a book for those who are planning or conducting psychotherapy groups. She sets out the necessary decisions and tasks for the group therapist in a clear and straightforward way, addressing many practical issues, questioning assumptions and stimulating thought about the processes entailed in selecting, establishing and conducting treatment groups.

Interest in group psychotherapy has progressed from the classic out-patient model, which is the subject matter of most of the books referred to so far, to the therapeutic application of groups for specific client populations.

Yalom (1983) and Rice & Rutan (1987) have written practically orientated texts about small-group psychotherapy for in-patients; from interpersonal and psychodynamic perspectives respectively. Both books examine the nature and impact of the in-patient setting on the group, and the modifications of technique required for group psychotherapy with acutely disturbed patients. In-patient group psychotherapy is often an adjunct to other methods of treatment, and flexibility in therapeutic style is recommended. Both books suggest provision of a hierarchy of treatment groups to cater for patients with different levels of psychological functioning, through which each patient can progress as he/she recovers from the illness which precipitated admission to hospital.

Over the past few years, a number of books have been published in North America which explore the applications of group psychotherapy in the treatment of specific populations such as alcoholics, drug abusers and elderly psychiatric patients. One of the few which is readily available in Britain is Ganzarain & Buchele's (1988) book about the group treatment of adult victims of childhood sexual abuse. They describe long-term analytic group psychotherapy with women victims, most of whom are highly disturbed and prone to dissociation, and impulsive and self-destructive actions. They offer observations on transference, countertransference and other dynamic processes which are valuable for understanding work with this client population in any setting.

Psychotherapy groups are complex, and empirical research is problematic. The pace of outcome research is slow, but considerable efforts have been devoted to the study of group process, and particularly to the therapeutic action of groups. Bloch & Crouch's (1985) summary of the empirical research into 'therapeutic factors' is detailed and comprehensive.

Several authors have sought to extend our theoretical understanding of psychodynamic therapy groups (e.g. Agazarian & Peters, 1981; Anzieu, 1984). My interest was stimulated particularly by the scholarly work of Ashbach & Schermer (1987) who attempt the development of a psychology of the 'group-as-group' through an integration of object relations, self, and group analytic psychologies. Their concept embodies three fundamental premises. Firstly, the individual and the group both emerge from a primal unity through the creation of a boundary which distinguishes one from the other. Secondly, the group and the individual are but two sides of the same coin, intrapsychic and group processes being complementary manifestations of a field of psychological action which embodies both. Thirdly, they suggest that intrapsychic, interactive and group-as-group processes are inter-related dynamic systems within the group, each of which functions as a container of experience. Within the space of the group, previously unbearable mental experience can be transformed into safe and tolerable interactions through which the private self can emerge into a harmonious social identity. There is enough food for thought and development in this one book to keep us going for the next decade.

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https://doi.org/10.1192/S000712500002403X Published online by Cambridge University Press