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An exploration of groups dynamics and the impact of unconscious processes

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Abstract

Despite extensive research on groups, organisations continue to experience problems with them. Is this an inherent feature of the nature of groups? This article aims to provide a practical understanding of the unconscious processes in groups and how these impact on group functioning. It further elaborates some guidelines for managers on optimising team / group performance.

The article interrogates the work of Sigmund Freud regarding his views on how groups function, drawing mainly on his work *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1921).

It asks if a study of Freud's work can help organisations reconsider the nature of groups, their potential inherent problems, and understanding the challenges to improving how groups function.

Objectives of the article

Organisations are generally presented as rational places (Kets De Vries, 1984) where homo economicus strives to achieve maximum utility, and where unconscious processes, and the role of emotion and irrationality are not acknowledged. Organisational structures and systems are developed using logical processes. Nitsun (1996:249) makes a critical point when he says that organisations are large groups (functional areas) comprised of smaller groups (departments). So, at the heart of a well-functioning organisation are well functioning groups. Nevertheless, little or no thought is given to the configuration and structure of work groups and the resulting group dynamics, as it is assumed they will operate on rational grounds. However, Freud reminds us that "The ego is not master in its own house," (Freud, 1917:143). By this he means that we may be driven by motivations that we are unaware of. Hoedemaeker refers to "the 'myriad of dysfunctionalities, travesties and fundamental

contradictions' inherent in purportedly rational management practices," (in Cederstom & Hoedemaeker Eds., 2010:xvi).

This article examines the psychology of groups and the challenges to achieving *Manageable Cooperation* given the inherent features of groups. It is presented under the following headings: types of groups; elements of group functioning; structure of groups; in-groups and out-groups; an approach to establishing well-functioning groups; what holds groups together; and the overall conclusion. The article draws on a previous study by the author (Hanlon, 2014).

Introduction

The complexity of many organisational tasks requires that employees work in groups or otherwise collaborate with colleagues. Freud had a particular interest in groups and this article mainly draws on his paper *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (Freud, 1921). In *Group Psychology* Freud investigated whether knowledge about the individual mental life could be transferred to group psychology. Kernberg (1999:96) notes that Freud's paper deals with a wide range of entities including crowds, mobs, political groups and stable organisations which feature structure and leadership. In his paper Freud drew extensively on the work of Le Bon (1895) and of McDougall (1920), in relation to their phenomenological descriptions of the mental life of individuals in a group situation. He spends some fifteen pages of the paper examining Le Bon's description of the group mind. He also reviews McDougall's work on how to improve group functioning. Freud's contribution to the paper includes his recognition of the roles of identification and idealisation, and the ego ideal in how groups function.¹

Types of Groups

In looking at groups it is important to note that different types of configurations of individuals are subsumed under the term 'group'. These can be broadly divided into two categories: those of a short duration (Le Bon's group type of the crowd is an example here) and those

¹ A glossary is provided at the end of the paper for these and other terms.

which are highly organised and lasting (management teams in companies). Organisations can have both of these types – short duration and *ad hoc* groups for various tasks e.g., project work and highly organised and lasting groups e.g., management teams.

This article focuses on organised and lasting groups.

Elements of Group Functioning

Freud highlights two main elements of group functioning.

Firstly, groups experience a feeling of invincibility and this allows the individual “to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint.” (Freud, 1921:74). From an organisational perspective then, we could argue that groups are more likely to make rash and thoughtless decisions than individuals, as there is less sense of individual responsibility for the decision.

Le Bon asserts that the group demands a master and is willing to follow anyone who sets themselves up as its master. This tendency also provides a part of the explanation for the ‘Group Think’ phenomena. This is a term attributed to Janis (1971), who used it to describe a process of group functioning whereby the groups desire for harmony lead to a lack of evaluation of alternative ideas. Furthermore, individuals are discouraged from disagreeing with the group. On the other hand, it is important to recognise that groups are also capable of great achievements through drawing on the synergies of the group (Freud, 1921:79).

Secondly the notion of ‘contagion’ is identified as a key characteristic of groups (Freud, 1921: 75). Freud, drawing on the work of Le Bon yet again, explains this as meaning that emotions are highly contagious in a group. Le Bon says that the individual is so influenced by the emotions and mood of the group that “He is no longer himself, but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will” (in Freud, 1921:76). Le Bon elaborates on this point and says that the mental functioning of the group descends several rungs of the evolutionary ladder. From an organisational perspective this means that, as a member of a group, we can become quite lazy at a cognitive level, leaving the ‘thinking’ to someone else. In this respect

Kahmeman (2011) elaborates on two approaches to decision-making, which he called System 1 and System 2. The latter type, which is of concern to us here, is effortful, conscious and rule-based, and makes demands on the individual's energy. By contrast System 1 is automatic and habit-based. In group decision-making, instead of using System 2, members may simply adopt the decisions of the leader and thus reduce the level of energy they input into the group. This is particularly the situation if staff are of the view that their opinions will not be considered fully anyway.

Furthermore, McDougall (in Freud 1921:85) is of the opinion that those with lower intelligence drag down those with higher intelligence to their level. French and Simpson (2010) note that this corresponds to Bion's basic assumption of Dependency – where the group members can treat the leader as a parent and let them lead the way, while the members take up a submissive position. If the group is led by an autocratic / narcissistic individual, the cycle perpetuates itself.

Another key dimension of how a group is constituted is the emotional ties (also called libidinal ties or eros) among members (Freud, 1921:91). A group member wishes to feel he / she is a member of the group and in harmony with it, so therefore, may agree to group ideas for this reason. Libidinal bonds (which can be vertical to the leader) or horizontal (to peers) act to constrain the individual's actions within the group (Freud 1921:95). Furthermore Mitscherlich (1978) reminds us that identification is a central aspect of human interrelation which leads people to adopt attitudes etc. consistent with the group in order to fit in.

Power is a further feature of groups. Vella (in Oakley, 1999:15) points out that lone individuals are vulnerable but can gain strength and protection in a group. How does the leader achieve power? According to Klaf (1961:43) identification plays a central role. Klaf notes that identification "is a patterned, security seeking process....and group members will often seek security from the leader at the price of giving up individual freedom." This view point is supported by Vella (in Oakley, 1999:27) who says groups also provide a sense of belonging. Freud notes in his paper *On Narcissism: An Introduction* that "the ego ideal opens up an important avenue for the understanding of group psychology," (Freud 1917:101). Le Bon argues that individuals in a group give up their individual ego and replace it with the ego ideal of the leader. The cognitive functioning of the individual regresses to a low level.

McDougall goes so far as to say that all intellectual tasks should be done by individuals and not by groups. He states that the group members adopt the ego ideal of the leader as their own, thereby transferring power and decision-making to him / her. Identification with the leader, however, is ambivalent so while the leader provides protection and security his/her place is secure, but if the leaders falters, the followers quickly turn against them. We see examples of this when previously successful political leaders lose power and the followers then attacked them.

Going back to the earlier point that, as a member of a group, the individual descends several rungs of the evolutionary ladder – this has serious implications. Freud asserts that groups are led by emotion, so are likely to make decisions based on flimsy or even incorrect evidence. LeBon states that the group is “impulsive, changeable and irritable,” (in Freud, 1921: 77). Anyone who disagrees with the group moving in a particular direction is likely to be attacked and even thrown out of the group. According to LeBon, the group’s main objective is to maintain the status quo – as such it rejects innovations and is deeply conservative. Therefore, from an organisational point of view, it seems that using groups as a mechanism to develop and implement change, while necessary, can also be problematic.

The notion of the anti-group is also important. Nitsun (1996) in his book *The Anti-Group*, notes that some groups operate in a very dysfunctional manner and may eventually break down. Group members may experience extreme pressure with concerns over survival (both individual and group) and over trust and integrity. Pressure may be experienced, particularly at the boundaries, as much of the dysfunctional behaviour occurs there (e.g., between departments or other organisational groups).

Structure of Groups

Jacques Lacan in his paper titled *Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual*, (1938, ch 2) proposes that the conjugal family has the structure of a group, with the Father as its head. In other groups then the Father is replaced with a chief or leader, but the basic group structure is essentially the same i.e., there is someone in charge of the rest of the members. Freud notes that an individual of superior strength usually establishes themselves as the

leader and the other members are held together libidinally. Freud says that such an individual was free and “his intellectual acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others... he loved no one but himself, or other people only in so far as they served his needs” (Freud, 1921:123).

Following the global financial crash, the Chief Executive of the Irish Stock Exchange claimed that some companies had been run as “personal fiefdoms” for too long, (Financial Times, Oct 19th 2010). Such narcissistic Chief Executives yield power with impunity. Some individuals are attracted to these leaders, who are usually charismatic. Drawing on the work of Mitscherlich (1978:10) it could be argued that charismatically gifted leaders can “insert his image, his ideals, into the psychic economy of ... his followers in place of the personal ego ideal.” The followers benefit as they gain prestige from association with a successful leader and feel “an intoxicating sense of omnipotence,” (Mitscherlich 1978:10). We have seen a recent example of this where Donald Trump’s followers attempted to gain control over the White House, (Dozier and Bergengruen, 2021). It is argued that the *Family Complexes* paper shows that the conjugal family is a type of template for later groups, including organisational groups. As such, the dynamics played out in the conjugal family, where the child is at his / her most impressionable, set the stage for later interactions.

Freud examined the basis of narcissism and this is discussed next. The term ‘narcissism’ was derived by Freud from Paul Nacker who used it to denote an individual who treats his own body as he would that of an external sexual object, (Freud 1917:416). Kernberg (1991:131) affirms that narcissism is a phase of normal psychic development; an aspect of normal life but can also be pathological. Therefore, we can have normal and pathological narcissism, (Kernberg 1991:133). An aspect of narcissism is over-valuation of the object – initially the individual’s own body / ego. A quantity of this narcissism can be projected by the leader onto the group. In other words, the leader ‘loves’ the followers (as long as they meet his expectations.) Freud described below how the parents can over value the child (as an extension of themselves). We can replace the *child* with the *group* to see the impact.

“Thus they are under a compulsion to ascribe every perfection to the childand to conceal and forget his shortcoming,” (Freud, 1917:91).

Individuals stuck at the narcissistic stage of development “have no place for others”, (Lacan, 1938:21). Leaders who are narcissistic will react aggressively to anyone whom they perceive to be opposing them. They see all their subordinates as an extension of themselves (mirror images) and need constant affirmation by their subordinates. Narcissism and self-esteem are connected. Kernberg (1991:141) holds the view that the “self” results from “the integration of the component self-images, or self-representations, that develop throughout all the real and fantasied experiences of interactions with others. The healthy self integrates both the libidinal and aggressive aspects of the self, whereas the narcissistic individual fails to integrate both these aspects, resulting in the grandiose self.

Narcissistic leaders in the past hired and fired at will. Their power has been curtailed somewhat by employment legislation. Nevertheless, anyone who dares to challenge them (or even who is perceived as challenging them) can expect to be expelled to the organisational equivalent of Siberia. The removal (or silencing) of anyone who questions the manager can lead to Group Think, referred to earlier. This was identified as a key factor in the Irish economic financial crisis (Nyberg, 2011). Group Think can also be viewed as related to the idea of in-groups and out-groups. These are explored next.

In-groups and out-groups

The psychological mechanism whereby in-groups and out-groups become established is particularly interesting and relevant for organisations.

Organisations tend to have some groups (formal or informal) which are viewed favourably, and other groups which are seen in a negative light are scapegoated. Freud’s views on libidinal connections are very insightful in regard to how some groups are seen positively. He refers to the impact of over-idealisation of the object (where the object, in this case the group), is seen as an extension of the ego of the leader. A quantity of the narcissistic libido of the leader flows out to the object. The result is that the ‘good’ group can do no wrong. It is protected from criticism, and any mistakes it makes are down played. Its characteristics are highly valued.

Of course, the members of the in-group must meet the leader's demands as, after all, the group is an extension of himself / herself. Any real or perceived view that the group is trying to establish a separate independent existence will be met with an aggressive response.

For an in-group to exist there must be an out-group. The latter could be a department in the organisation, a competitor organisation or some other group which is the target of aggression. Freud (1931) in *Civilization and its Discontents* says that even large numbers of people can be formed into a group provided some others are excluded and are targets for aggression. We see examples of this even at country level e.g., the main population versus an ethnic group. At organisation level we see departments in the same company at loggerheads, or companies engaged in various battles with competitors. From an organisational perspective, understanding how these dynamics arise is useful, as otherwise a lot of energy can be diverted from the main organisational task to aggressive ends.

An approach to establishing well-functioning groups

In relation to groups, the organisation is faced with two tasks – their establishment and optimising their functioning. The needs of the employee as a member of various groups must also be considered.

How does an organisation address these characteristics that a group can fall victim to? Anyone with experience of working in groups (most of us) will have experienced at first hand some of the dysfunctional elements that can occur in groups. McDougall sets out five 'Principle Conditions' (in Freud 1921:86) to increase the functioning of groups. In essence McDougall's approach is to structure the group so that the individuals within it maintain their individual ego functioning and enables synergies in the group situation.

These 'Principle Conditions' are listed in figure 1. The figure also includes comments by myself on each of these.

Principle Conditions for Effective Group Functioning	Comment
1. Continued existence of the group – either same people in the group or fixed positions.	This point regarding continued existence of the group is important, bearing in mind that many groups are now <i>ad hoc</i> with a limited lifespan. The allocation of specific roles / tasks within the group (principle no. 5) provide a sense of individual responsibility.
2. Members should know the nature, function and capacities of the group so that emotional bonds can be formed.	Freud reminds us that the group is held together by a power of some kind - which he identifies as Eros (1921:92).
3. There should be some competition / rivalry with other groups.	In a well functioning group, having an external 'enemy' helps to promote group cohesion. French & Simpson (2010) elaborate how Bion's basic assumption of Fight / Flight can be harnessed to improve group functioning. Care must be taken that the rivalry does not become extreme or it can consume excessive group energy.
4. Group should have traditions, customs and habits.	Traditions etc help to bind the group members together. Freud notes this point in <i>Totem & Taboo</i> (1913).
5. Group should have a definite structure especially with regard to roles and functions of members.	Having specific roles also supports the need for containment as proposed by Menzies Lyth (in Lawlor & Webb, 2009).

Figure 1: McDougall's 'Principle Conditions' for Effective Group Functioning, adapted from Freud, (1921:86),

What holds the group together?

Freud identifies that groups are held together by the libidinal ties among members, (1921:103). These libidinal ties emerge out of the identification of group members with each other. In his book *Totem and Taboo* (1913) Freud looked at the basis of this identification. He makes a very important point in a footnote of *Group Psychology* where he says in relation to the development of identification in the clan "the surprising discovery that they rest upon the acknowledgement of a common substance (by the members of the clan), and may therefore even be created by a meal eaten in common" (Freud 1921:110).

Organisations can make use of such activities as annual dinners, award ceremonies, and team-building events to build libidinal ties between members. These activities should be viewed, not as an unnecessary expense to be discarded in times of economic crisis, but instead as an essential aspect of creating a strong collegial environment where employees (and the organisation) flourish. One of the concerns emerging as a result of working from home during the pandemic is a reduction of connections between organisation members (both staff and managers). This can result in a weakening of the connection (libidinal bonds) with the organisation and lead to various problems, including increased staff turnover.

Concluding comments

This article examined group processes and surfaced unconscious factors that can impact on their functioning. It mainly drew on Freud's *Group Psychology and Analysis of the Ego* (1921) paper, but also identified aspects of his work relating to groups in his papers *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1917), and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). Freud shows that the individual, and by extension the group, is often driven by unconscious motivations including aggression, fear and power.

An important aspect of well-functioning groups is creating libidinal ties between members. Some suggestions on how to establish these ties were outlined in this article. Such bonds will support more effective communication between organisational members and facilitate problems being sorted out through informal channels.

Organisations with a dispersed workforce have additional challenges creating libidinal bonds between group members as employees may only interact via technology. Where employees have to join new groups frequently e.g., project type structures, the issue of creating libidinal bonds poses an additional challenge. Where such ties are not established, organisations are likely to find a lower commitment by employees to the organisation.

Developing well-functioning groups which do not fall prey to 'group think', destructive energies, narcissistic leaders or deterioration of ego functioning, is a challenge for organisations. The deterioration of ego functioning in groups is highlighted by Freud. McDougall's 'Principles of Group Functioning' (presented in Figure 1) to alleviate this problem are worthy of consideration by organisations in this respect.

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Glossary

Ego ideal

This can be described as the ideal (life, job, type of life) the person measures themselves against. It is an internal guide governing the individual's position in the world.

Grandiose self

An unrealistic sense of superiority.

Idealisation

To think or present someone or something as perfect.

Identification

This is where a person adopts one or more attributes of another person.

Libidinal

This is a Freudian term. It can be described as the ties between people. Freud saw libido as the driving force for all behaviour. (Libido is energy, not just sexual energy).

Narcissistic

Freud defines narcissism as the investment of libido in the ego. (A person who thinks the world revolves around themselves is viewed as narcissistic).

Object

Internalised images of early caretakers (usually the Mother). Objects continue to have a strong influence throughout life.

Useful source for further information

Evans, Dylan. (1996), *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Routledge.