From chaos through cosmos toward coinonia: A group-analytic developmental line

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Abstract: The phenomenon of group cohesion is among most examined in group psychotherapy and repeatedly confirmed as the one of the most important curative factors. It is defined as a force of a symbiotic unity. On the other hand, the phenomenon of coherence is mainly understood as a harmonic connection of different members. Both phenomena, observed through sequences of the time in a group-analytic group, appeared as the result of the developmental processes of individuals in the group and of the group as a whole. The observation brought to a hypothesis that we are facing the parallelism of the individuation processes and group developmental process that have involved both – group-analytic and everyday interpersonal life. Group cohesion appeared as the result of the overcome chaotic paranoid position. The group, previously experienced as unknown and intimidating, becomes a symbiotic object, safe place gradually supporting the improving autonomy of individual members, mainly through important everyday relationships. Simultaneously and gradually group-analytic culture is changing from chaos and autism to equality, cohesion in the sense of "one mind", toward coherence of interesting different members, from "forming and norming" to "performing". It seems that group cohesion and group coherence are not phenomena *per se* but rather two positions in a group-developmental line, going from autism through cohesion and differentiation towards coherent interactive relationships.

Key words: group psychotherapy, group cohesion, coherence, group process

Od kaosa preko kozmosa do koinonije: Skupinskoanalitična razvojna linija

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Povzetek: V raziskovanju zdravilnih dejavnikov v skupinski psihoterapiji se v zadnjih desetletjih največ pozornosti namenja fenomenu skupinske kohezije. Izraža se z občutki pripadnosti in navezanosti, ki se ponovno in ponovno potrjujejo kot poglavitni zdravilni dejavnik. Kohezijo lahko definiramo kot silo simbiotične enosti, ki zagotavlja varnost in bližino. Sodobne raziskave in analize pa vendar opozarjajo na možnost, da kohezija, če obvladuje skupino preveč in predolgo, konzervativno ohranja enoumje in je tako izvor obrambnega delovanja skupine. Zato nekateri koheziji ob bok postavljajo koherenco, ki jo prepoznavajo kot harmonično organizacijo sicer med seboj različnih posameznikov. Ko oboje – kohezijo in koherenco – opazujemo skozi skupinski terapevtski proces, skozi časovne sekvence, opazimo, da so ti premiki odvisni od zmožnosti za vzpostavljanje odnosov vključenih članov ter od narave in stopnje

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njihove individualiziranosti. V skupini kot celoti se te karakteristike pokažejo v tipičnem razvojnem procesu. Na mestu je hipoteza, da gre za paralelizem individualizacijskih procesov posameznikov in skupinskih razvojnih procesov. Skupinska kohezija se razvije ob tem, ko vključeni presežejo začetno kaotično paranoidno pozicijo in si nudijo vzajemno razumevanje, varnost in oporo. Skupina, ki je sprva prestavljala neznan in zastrašujoč prostor, postane zatočišče simbiotične enotnosti. Preseganje kaosa in izkušnja pripadnosti prinašata medene tedne skupine, ki se jim je težko odpovedati na račun napredovanja posameznikov, tako v terapevtskih skupinah kot v vsakdanjem življenju. Vendar pa brez diferenciacije ni poti naprej. Kohezivna skupina se pogosto ob izgubljanju notranjih meja paranoidno zapira v polje odnosov z drugimi skupinami. V primerih, ko kohezivna skupina prične najprej tolerirati, nato pa tudi podpirati različnost pogledov, izkušenj, čustvenega doživljanja, prehaja iz kohezije v koherentno organizacijo. Pri tem ne gre le za toleranco, ampak predvsem za spoznanje, kako bogata je lahko izmenjava med različnimi ljudmi in nato tudi narodi, kulturami. Kaže, da kohezija in koherenca nista fenomena per se (kot je bilo oboje obravnavano do danes), ampak prej predstavljata dve poziciji v skupinski razvojni liniji, ki teče od avtizma, preko kohezije in nato po poteh diferenciacije do koherentnih interaktivnih odnosov.

Ključne besede: skupinska psihoterapija, skupinska kohezija, koherenca, skupinski procesi.

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During the 70s and 80s of former century the concept of cohesion in group therapy drew the attention of many researchers. It has been well known from psychoanalysis and other individual therapies, how the capacity for the deep and confidential relationship, on the side of the client and therapist, may be the crucial therapeutic factor. Speaking of group psychotherapy, this capacity is demanded by the majority of the members so that they can develop group cohesion. Truax (1961) asserted that cohesiveness may be the central factor of the analysis in the small group and successful groups are cohesive.

Yalom (1975) initiated a systematic research of the therapeutic factors. Followed by many other researchers, it was confirmed that group cohesion may practically be the prototypical therapeutic factor.

Yalom (1975) defined group cohesion as "the attractiveness of a group for its members" (Pines, 1998, p. 59). Larkin (1976, in Gazda, 1984) describes group cohesiveness as "the collective expression of personal belongingness […] binding members emotionally to the common task as well as to one another, assuring greater stability of the group […] and developing a shared frame of reference among group members that allows for more tolerance for diverse aims of group members. Obviously, then, a cohesive group is a stable and productive group that can be quite task or goal oriented" (p. 56). It seems to me that, in fact, Larkin is speaking of a coherent and not cohesive group or, at least, he seems to merge both of them. However, group cohesiveness may easily divert the behaving to conformity with the group norms that can produce an obstacle for reaching the goal of restoring or enhancing the member's autonomy which, seen by Helen Durkin, is the primary goal of group psychotherapy (in Nicholas, 1984, p. 133). Durkin asserts that contact operations in

a group process should, at the same time, be a process of establishing boundaries. It seems to me that the problem, how to reach not ignorant but a tolerant and at the same time interactive relations with the respect for the boundaries of the other go far beyond the cohesion of the group.

Pines (1998) finally distinguished cohesion and coherence describing both as two different processes. They differ in the degree of organisation and differentiation. Cohesive group, although having a recognisable inner structure, is more like broken pieces glued or cemented together in one, while coherence indicates a specific organisation of different units into a spiritual, intellectual, aesthetic relation. It seems that only coherence is seen by Pines as the result of a developmental process. Pines is comparing cohesive sticking together with Bion's (1961) basic assumptions of performance of the group, functioning according to archaic emotions. Although creating a holding and containing environment, it does not develop where individuals merge. Cohesive group may, then, as well as protective, be a defensive one. On the contrary, when coherence is developed, the group went through "utopian stages, group illusion about enjoying in a sense of unity" (Pines, 1998, p. 65). A coherent group has replaced the emotional glue with a rational and functional self-organisation.

Pines (1998), as well as British developmental psychoanalysts in general, tries to avoid Mahler's concept of separation and individuation, although Anna Freud (1963), introducing the concept of the developmental lines, considered it as a prototypical developmental line, called *From dependency to emotional self-reliance and adult object relations*. Pines would rather see the processes of cohesion and coherence connected to attachment and identification phenomena. Quoting Lichtenberg (1982, in Pines, 1998) how psychoanalysis possibly over-states the separateness of man and his degree of independence, Pines continues to be critical about the western individualism and its reflection in psychoanalysis in the resistance to the interrelational concept. However, the question remains whether Mahler advocates an exaggerated individualism or rather explains both, the importance of a good enough symbiotic experience and the accomplished autonomy. Mahler's concept may well help to understand the difference among mature autonomy and immature and neurotic search for independence.

Ashbach and Schermer (1987) relate to Mahler's work, reminding us that Margaret Mahler herself was very careful not to generalise her findings prematurely to adults and groups. However, "the present authors hope that a tentative application of Mahler's point of view to group psychology does not constitute too great an inductive leap from a research paradigm intended primarily for the study of child development" (p. 92). According to Kauf (1977, in Ashbach & Schermer, 1987, p. 92), "aspects of symbiosis / separation-individuation processes are repeated in groups as both individual valences and group processes". Of course there are other aspects and developmental lines like attachment, mirroring, identification and last but not least cognitive development, mentioned by Pines (1998) as Robert Kegan's Neo-Piagetian approach, where we can find the link with ego-psychological concept

of hierarchically organised ego functions. Not that some of these theories may be incorrect, but it is probably true that the processes through different developmental lines are interrelated, influencing one another.

Clinical illustration

Masha and Darinka entered the group in September, after the summer leave. The group went into the fourth year of the existence. There were three old members included at the beginning and two that were included during the course of the group. Jan, a mail member, could not reach beyond his counter dependent attitude and prematurely ended the treatment after two years, in July.

Masha, a woman in her thirties, was a warm, over adapted person. Everybody liked her and she enjoyed the position where everyone needed her. Her mother, a highly professional woman, was, in her private life, constantly seeking Masha's emotional support, trying to use her daughter as a mothering object. Her father constantly demanded Masha's admiration. Although in fact he was an unsuccessful alcoholic, he was idealised by her. When her parents moved to the newly built house in the country, Masha was able to oppose the utopia that all of them could live happily there. So she remained in a flat in the city and took over the role of a guardian of the primary home and took care of her few years younger brother. Although she had a presentiment of co-dependency, she was not aware of her role of keeping the family together. She became more and more unhappy, having had some unsuccessful relations with mainly immature partners. She accepted an employment evidently below her capacities. Though she may be very responsible at her job, she has had a serious delay with her diploma at the faculty. Then she realized that she is avoiding growing up, and she decided to enter the therapy group.

Darinka has had a similar type of avoiding the role of an adult woman although her childhood was quite different. She had been raised by her grandmother and aunt at a small farm. Her mother left, went to the city to work in a factory and became a convinced proletarian. Coming to a visit during weekends, she kept developing more and more conflicts in relationships with her mother and sister. And yet there was an archetypical similarity – three generations, four women and no one created a lasting relationship with a man. Though Darinka as a child could not wait for her mother to come on Saturdays, her real primary object was her grandmother. Then the seven-years-old Darinka was simply moved to the town to live with her mother and started attending school. She reacted with severe separation crisis. Since then she has struggled with her psychopathology. In her late thirties she entered developmental analytical psychotherapy lasting nearly four years, and completed it quite successfully. She had realized how she was brought up by her grandmother in a feudal obedience and at the same time contaminated with her mother's proletarian ideology. Suffering because of the conflict among internalised objects and attitudes,

she created an idealised self representation of herself as an independent intellectual but still without her faculty diploma in her early 40s. However, she did not develop a capacity to create a successful partnership with a man or a cooperative attitude in a group. Both her private and professional life was affected by that deficit. Therefore, after a two-year break, she entered a therapeutic group, led by the same therapist.

Masha and Darinka entered a cohesive, defensive and relatively closed small (probably too small) group. Masha started with her over adapted and regressive behaviour, fitting well into a cohesive but somehow co-dependent culture of the group. Darinka, on the other hand, acted in a manner of a counter dependent behaviour, trying to discuss topics with the therapist only, offering herself to the group as a scapegoat. Before the group and her were ready to work out the problem, probably the most important therapeutic matter of the group, Darinka dropped out. Masha survived in a holding atmosphere and step-by-step started practising. With the support of the group she passed the last exam before the diploma at the faculty and after that somehow anxiously retired to a depressive dissatisfaction with her brother, parents and boyfriend. The group, ready to take sides, continued with giving the credit to the member, blaming those from outside. They would neither explore Masha's role nor the group cohesive but egalitarian position borderless inside and in a paranoid position towards outside.

Slowly the differentiation took place and some of the old members became preoccupied by their practicing and self-actualising activities. Although most of these processes took place outside the group it would slowly change the group culture, pushing in front the dynamic matrix. Masha forgot about the problems of her primary family and started working through the dynamics of another group of great importance to her. She was a founder member of a female singing group. Thirteen of them – more than a small group – have been performing for nearly ten years. As they were becoming more and more famous, the differentiation that took place was accompanied by increasing rivalry. A cohesive group before, they were confronted with a lack of boundaries and organisation so that a threat of a decay was on the door. Masha succeeded to connect the pieces together and accepted the challenge of how to learn to use the words "no, I, I want, I demand …". Parallel to the singing group it suddenly appeared within the therapeutic group as a training in action, in the family relations and in the interaction with her boyfriend. The unspoken contents became negotiable. Step by step Masha created the needed distance to her mother's expectations and her father's drinking problems without loosing love for them. She decided to move to her boyfriend's town, taking the risk of living together, and left her brother on his own. At the same time her singing group was offered to give a gala concert for their tenth anniversary. She was the one introducing an acceptable musical director and promoting the idea how to create a very heterogeneous repertoire, exposing solo singers, duos, trios, larger parts of the group and the group as a whole. Masha described the outcome at the therapeutic group with enthusiasm. When the singing group discovered a harmony in differences, they experienced a

massive delight of coherence, and astonishing, they received unanimous support by their husbands or boyfriends.

That was the time when, in her third year of therapy, Masha started feeling ready to bring the group therapy to an end. The group also discovered the meaning of its defensive standstill in the pleasant mood of cohesion. They became not only tolerant but also eager to accept new members.
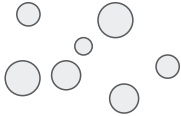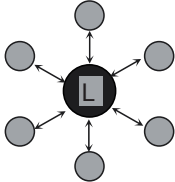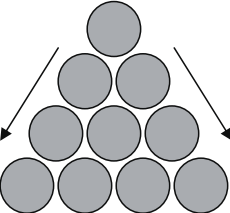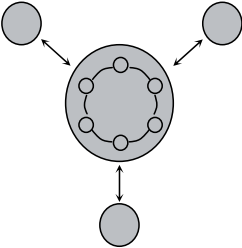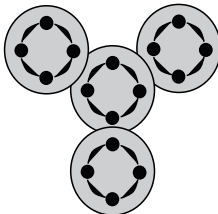

Conclusion

Clinical observation supports my idea about cohesion and coherence, not as two different processes but two stages of a same developmental spiral. I believe that we are speaking about the prototypical developmental line (see Figure 1) observed both in individual and group process, starting in autism or schizoid-paranoid position, going through dyadic merging or symbiotic type of dependency and border deficit towards the therapist, in a depressive position. As the communication spread around the group, the conflict fight for power in the group (what inevitably provokes feelings of envy, jealousy and rivalry) strengthen the feelings of being threatened and the members have to search for some alliance. In group therapy we can observe how the members make the transition from the therapist as an object to the group as a whole as an object. In this stage cohesion takes place. Primary, primitive emotional identification, the same feelings, one thought, group as a mother with the capacity to hold and contain – these are the signs indicating how the group represents to the majority of the members an object of the symbiotic, emotionally relevant expectations. And indeed, the cohesive group offers a lot of understanding and grandiose mirroring. It represents the basic matrix offering the atmosphere of basic trust, the feeling of belongingness as the correlate of the attachment. However, the group during this honeymoon stage may also be egalitarian, with border deficit within the group, provoking the fear of engulfment. It is naturally preceded by counter dependent struggle for self. The fascination may be followed by the disappointment and in this group position we can face the danger of the destruction of the group, the phenomenon of late dropouts or premature counter dependent conclusion of some member, searching the way through the distorted, self-sufficient pseudo individuality in the sense of independence instead of autonomy. Group therapeutic groups are composed of mainly disturbed persons, often avoiding the responsibility as an aspect of autonomy, and that is why prolonged dependency or the forms of pseudo individuation are seen more often.

The group that succeeds in developing beyond egalitarian and counter dependent position not only tolerates but supports and engages specific differences among members. Some research work of Vec (2001), a student of mine, showed how this process may be far from linear succession of changes, however, through the chaos of the events usually an order in the sense of a spiral movement in the opened auto

poetic system emerges. Usually the sense of belonging that goes beyond a cohesive group as the attachment goes beyond symbiosis, gives the individual the strength to take over the responsibility of an autonomous person, responsible also for the group as a whole. As we know from developmental psychology, moving to the advanced developmental phase does not mean that the characteristics of the previous phase have been extinguished. Although not dominant any more, the previous system of actions remains as a possibility. Therefore in a coherent group the experience of cohesion not only remains present but continuously supports connection and belongingness while the differentiation in a state of coherence decreases the fear of engulfment and loss of identity. As for the individual, the same for the group as a whole this developmental level brought the capacity of regression in the service of the ego/group organisation. The experience of cohesion will prevent the group members to move to egocentric individualism and the group to ethnocentrism (in relation to other groups), as well as the experience of coherence will prevent dedifferentiation in the moments of surrendering to cohesive unity. The paradox between connectedness and differentiation is resolved by the integration.

In 1994 at a congress in Madrid, I entered a discussion with Malcolm Pines, when he first claimed for coherent instead of cohesive relationships in the macro system of international relations. My idea how those who were living in egalitarian systems need some time for the process of individuation to become potent to establish a harmony in coherence was hardly understood. Then I offered the metaphor how a child learns to sing in a group with more voices singing. First he would merge, imitating other voices, then, gradually he learns his specific voice and after that becomes able to fit in the harmony. Masha has, parallel to the group therapy curative environment, reached her maturity literally through these processes and helped the group to move forward.

Negativism		
Forming		DEPENDENCE (individual in the relation to the leader) "Being" principle
Storming Fight – Flight		INTRAGROUP CONFLICT COUNTER-DEPENDENCE (individuals) "Doing" principle action – reaction egocentrism
Norming		CODEPENDENCE ON GROUP AS A WHOLE inner fusion and paranoid reaction to outside: ethnocentrism *COHESION*
Performing		INTERACTION INTERDEPENDENCE in the sense of mutual solidarity of different individuals (inside) and groups as whole (outside) *COHERENCE*

Figure 1. Group developmental process. Remarks: (i) The advanced developmental achievement does not cause the extinction of the previous phase. (ii) The quality of cohesion remains important in a coherent group as well as the sense of belonging, however, there is a new sense of individual responsibility. (iii) The experience of coherence prevents the fear of engulfment as well as the danger of individualistic alienation. (iv) The experience of coherence enables the emphatic interaction without losing the differentiation.

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