

Group Action – The Dynamics of Groups in Therapeutic, Educational and Corporate Settings

by T. Martin Ringer

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Reviewed by Don Reekie

Martin is indebted to psychodrama training which informs and undergirds his development as a psychoanalytically-oriented social analyst and group worker. His formative experience in outdoor pursuits and life skills education was later expanded through his work and related study in therapeutic, educational and corporate settings. Franciose Ringer, his life-partner to whom he has dedicated the book, has gifted the core element of attachment to Martin's theoretical stance. Forewords by well-known European group analysts Malcolm Pines and Claudio Neri indicate their regard for his writing.

This book offers is an important reference for psychodrama practitioners and trainees. It provides common language descriptions of many processes we usually read in Morenean terminology. Martin bases the writing on stories drawn largely from outdoor adventure groups which earths theoretical ideas and therapeutic

analysis in the everyday encounters that are recognisably the 'normalis' of human life and not the pathology. However this book is also packed with easily digested psychodynamic terms in common use. These are expounded for group workers with simplicity and clarity.

"The reflective space" stands central in the book and in Martin's work with groups. It means that the leader and other group members have the ability to hold the group consciousness and flow with each other in growing trust and resilience. Each member expands her or his presence to include others and to work with the group anxieties and beyond them, in active and group-reflective mode. Attachment theory views each person - whether leader or group member - as "building ... a phantasy space (which) begins at birth and is associated with having experiences of secure attachment to caregivers... Later in life positive relationships with significant others

and positive experiences in groups strengthen the internalised reflective capacity".

This indicates that Martin has taken up a way of being a group worker which involves living in the moment. He recognises how crucial it is that the leader develops an ability to hold her or his own anxieties and to also co-produce a culture in which the group strengthens its collective holding of group anxieties. He notes that "when a leader is connected to the emotional field of a group, his/her feelings are not solely his or her 'own', but are a mixture of personal tendencies and a response to what is unspoken in the group." He concludes effective group leaders work with the unconscious as well as the conscious processes. Groups need to have a rationale, purpose and structure that can be expressed in terms of logic and rationality. Yet for every aspect that occurs within the consciousness of group leader and group members, there are associated processes that occur in the unconscious life of the group. His book outlines a frame for enquiry, observation and thinking, rather than providing a set of tools. He notes that personal authority results from having the ability to manage one's own internal world of feelings and phantasies so that one is not overwhelmed or seduced by them. It is certainly not a 'painting by numbers' approach.

Martin notes that the current Western political and economic climate supports the marginalisation, trivialisation and fragmentation of complex fields of endeavour such as group facilitation and leadership. "The business literature abounds with descriptions of how to achieve significant results by following a number of prescribed steps and these may be useful as a starting point, but will rarely hold up for long periods in complex or conflicted situations."

The book gives huge assistance to a thinking group-worker involved in integrating their own person, with their strengths and frailties, as they accept the challenge to lead, contribute, and intervene in groups. Where, and in what ways this work may be engaged with, are indicated by Martin.

He works largely in corporate workplaces and finds that most corporations do not acknowledge the central role of reflective thinking and collaborative learning. In his own experience having personal psychotherapy, professional supervision, clinical supervision, and a disciplined focus on his own process in relation to others has been worthwhile. Yet, "the corporate world has largely managed to perpetuate the myth that reflective, emotional and relational matters are either 'fringe' or at best peripheral to 'core business'. The cost is exceptionally high levels of splitting, projection, projective identification and consequent scapegoating in organisations." Of course therapeutic and clinical organisations too do not necessarily bring forward their reflective, emotional, and relational intelligence to the advantage of their own 'house' and 'back-yard'.

Martin uses the term 'role' throughout the book to mean function, with accompanying expectations, tasks and responsibilities, or position, with its accompanying sets of relationships. 'Role' for the psychodramatist is more idiosyncratic and includes much wider areas of being and doing than function and position in relation to others. These differences are of course fundamental. Yet Martin writes in a manner that encompasses the essence of role dynamics and theory. There is never doubt that he is attending to the whole way of being a person has in the specific environmental, social and even cosmic context. However it seems that Martin

misses a connection to Moreno's appreciation of and application of role to personality structure on the one hand, and to the nature and measurement of group life on the other. He describes psychodrama as "a group centred methodology with strong action and experiential bases...that claimed to have invented group therapy". He expresses surprise at the absence in psychodrama of the theory of 'group' to supplement the 'role theory' of individual functioning. In contrast my own view is that role theory and sociometry are 'theories in use' focussing on group and intra-personal psychology. In spite of the developments within ANZPA to apply cultural atom concepts to social and to personality measurement perhaps there has not been sufficient clarity of communication for these understandings to be strongly recognised and applied amongst us. Unless Martin is simply right here. It is true that Moreno's writing is not cohesively organised to carrying a theory of groups and yet all his writing is based on the premise of groups from cosmos, to society, to social atom.

While Martin does not refer to 'psychological social and cultural atom', his notion of working models underlaid with internal working models covers much that is also encompassed in the concept of 'social and cultural atom'. For a psychodrama practitioner, reviewing this area with Martin as guide, brings alternative viewpoints and slants of lighting that open up familiar territory in fresh and stimulating ways. To review the subjectivity of personal mapping and to investigate memory, the conscious, pre-conscious, fantasy, phantasy (with some similarities to 'surplus reality'), attachment, and transference is a fascinating and informative journey.

Boundaries' and 'containment' are not

my favourite words. Not surprisingly a psychodynamic group-worker steeped in psychoanalytic and attachment conceptualisation will use both of them. (Martin calls to my attention as reader the "out of awareness" responses we all make to "words and concepts"). He writes: "... you have in the back of your mind ... out of awareness ... sets of codes that you call on to interpret each event". So my aversion to these 'words' may not just be from my observation of group patterns, but also arise from my 'cultural atom' or 'internal working model', with all its phantasies.

My avoidance of the words is not about the concepts that stand behind them, but the metaphoric power they carry to produce damagingly restrictive patterns of interaction between people. They promote the imposition of prohibitions rather than personal discernment and group norms with overtly negotiated agreements. Martin uses these words, but I am delighted that they do not prevent his working thoroughly with the realities of each area of life, each with its own range of functional behaviours, and considerations for respectful and life enhancing interactions. Martin's approach will not get us stuck at the edges fearfully incanting 'commandments'. He focuses on containment that is the holding by the leader and the group of the reflective space.

In the author's preface Martin writes: "The book is for people who want to develop their ability to create their own activities and ways of intervening in groups, rather than for those who want to be given ready-made interventions." "This fits what I've read. It was worth the read.