



Beyond Words With Group Dynamics

■ **Claus Faber and Patrizia Tonin**

Abstract

In this article we describe a group dynamic approach we used at our workshop at the 2023 ANSE Summer University in Budapest. We allowed for the “Group Dynamic Space” to be experienced in its three dimensions: Belonging, intimacy and power. This theory is a diagnostic framework which enables us to see beyond words into the unspoken “container” of a group, enabling supervisors to support groups in their internal autonomous development.

Groups are daily work for most supervisors. Whether we supervise or train teams, whether we facilitate group events or work in teams, we always encounter group phenomena. Therefore, working in and with groups can rarely be called unknown territory. We all have practice, and we all have at least implicit theories about groups. Nevertheless, we notice that group dynamic theories are not common ground, even among supervision experts. We believe that an understanding of some essential group dynamic theories can provide an important contribution to supervisors in their work with groups and teams.

The Unknown and Unsaid in a Group

We often tend to develop theories along a relatively static concept or a process – both suggest stability and suggest that something “is”. This is – in short – a myth: Nothing is stable, nothing behaves as predicted, especially in groups. Theories are helpful in understanding social phenomena. However, in their application to living systems, we risk reducing the complexity of human interactions too much and thus we trivialize them. That narrows and misleads our perception: Once we “know” what is happening, our brain goes into something like a “power sleep mode”, reducing our perception to fit what we already know. We lock ourselves into a wrong interpretation of reality.

What is helpful to counteract this “lock in” phenomenon? In order to access this complex dynamic, we have to move beyond words and connect to our intuition and “gut feelings” – the surface of our subconscious inner self.

Pandora’s Box

Where can we find this subconsciousness in a group? Wilfred Bion (2021) developed the theory that a group has many thoughts and feelings it can’t talk about in a specific moment, like fear, joy or curiosity. Bion says: We store that in a container, and we keep it there, and that means: We feel it, but we don’t talk about it. It stays unresolved, like a taboo, but temporary. We don’t keep it there forever (that would make it a true taboo no one ever is allowed to name). The trick our mind performs is this: While talking about something else, we build the ability to touch the unspeakable. Bion called this content of the container “thoughts, waiting for a thinker”.

In an early group process, we can observe this process most clearly: Imagine a situation when a new group process starts. A handful of strangers in a room, sitting in a circle, peeking at each other or looking down their nose,

reluctant to speak (or eager to speak up because silence is unbearable). What thoughts are around? They could be like “will these people be nice to me?”, or: “all these people seem so competent, only I am insecure” (and the irony is: many, if not all people feel that), or: “whom could I team up with to be comforted?”, and many more. To ask these questions aloud, or to express the anxiety associated with them, would be a taboo. If someone speaks it out, people might look away, no-one might answer, or a game of compliments and comforting might arise. It is a taboo because no one can resolve it at that point. So we keep quiet and keep it in the container.

As supervisors, it is extremely helpful to peek into this container: In developing ideas, to get at what is in there, we can focus our interventions in a way to support the group’s own ability so that the group itself develops the capacity to talk about what is contained. This is what we call “theory based intervention”.

We might call this container “Pandora’s Box”, and this image is very significant, because it shows our fear of touching this container. Greek mythological Pandora, a God-like beauty, receives a box from Zeus, containing all the evil and all the hopes of the world. On his orders, she gives the box to humanity with the instruction never to open it, and we know the outcome: humans do open it and unleash disaster. As practitioners in group dynamics, we tend to think of the container as something more friendly, rather something unfinished, growing, but very fragile, which needs time to mature – more like an embryo, waiting to be born.

A Space With Three Dimensions

The idea of a group dynamic space dates back to the most prominent of all founders of group dynamics, Kurt Lewin. In his Field Theory, he describes how the complex

social interactions in a group create a dynamic field which influences our behaviour in a way that a particular action is more likely than others (Stützle-Hebel & Antons, 2015). That idea found fertile ground: William D. Schutz (1966) developed the idea of three dimensions within this “field”: Belonging, intimacy and power. As a two-dimensional “field” would not fit logically, the term “group dynamic space” emerged and was further developed by more recent scholars (Antons et al., 2004). What do these three dimensions mean?

• Belonging

“Belonging” distinguishes between inside and outside. This distinction is the very basis of a group: it establishes the space in which the group acts and develops, and the boundary to the outside, where it doesn’t. Lewin called this boundary “skin”, thinking of it as a semipermeable membrane: It lets something through, but still: there is inside and outside, and it is possible to tell the one from the other.

At the personal level, this boundary serves as protection: you might be a neglected or discriminated member of the group, but still a member – allowed to be there. The position along or “in” this skin is very delicate: affectively charged, endangered, sometimes also powerful as a gatekeeper to the outside world. Since the historic Jews used to blame a goat for all their sins and sent it out into the desert to die, exclusion is a terrible threat.

At the group level, this distinction between inside and outside stabilizes the group. Without this “skin”, the group will disintegrate at the first sign of trouble: No contact can persist, because every move could be the reason for chaos or dissolution. Protected by this skin, dissent is possible. Irritation can be seen and transformed and the group can develop.

A glimpse into how Group Dynamics can support Supervision: The „Group Dynamic Space“ enables us to diagnose, how groups organize themselves and perform. With this theory, we are able to set more effective group interventions, so that clients can cooperate more successfully with each other.

• Intimacy

“Intimacy” establishes individual contact and enables us to share the feeling of being close to each other. Let’s remember that being in groups is a state which can be inherently frightening too: We are unable to predict with certainty all others’ feelings and reactions towards us. Our subconsciousness reacts to this anxiety and searches for a remedy, and that is: it looks for allies. Symptoms of intimacy can be of a very transparent matter, like coming and leaving together, spending breaks together, being physically close, or openly referring to a “we” in front of others. It also has very subtle forms, like whom do we pay attention to, who supports whom or seeks eye contact.

At the personal level, it also allows us to differentiate from the group, without being all alone. It is the axis of like and

dislike and the space for sharing more intimate thoughts and feelings. If a group does not allow intimacy, fear will be high. Rarely anyone would expose anything from the unprotected inner self. Many might feel lonely.

At the group level, intimacy is an important key to its dynamic potential. Group members can regulate their fears and joy. This creates an environment in which a group is able to make contact, to differentiate, to disagree, to explore, to consolidate. In short: it enables the group to evolve and to perform.

• Power

We have to be careful with this concept, as it is understood in many different, contradictory ways, often emotionally charged. We see power as a social process which emerges when people interact - a definition we owe to the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1970). It reduces complexity and creates "order" by establishing hierarchy. It is not a property or role someone possesses, like when we say with fear or admiration: "This is a really powerful person". Hannah Arendt describes "following" as the autonomous and wilful act to subjugate one's own will to that of another. It is a property of a social relationship: Leading comes from following, thus power comes from people voluntarily doing and supporting what others do and say. It is a social habit deeply rooted in our human nature: In order to act in an interdependent way, we have a social process that lets us listen to some people more than to others.

At the individual level, power frees us from complexity. We don't have to think it all through by ourselves, because frankly, we can't. It also offers protection from the uncertainty of whether an enterprise will succeed or fail, because it is easier to think "we failed" than "I failed". In a group, we dare more and achieve more. It also enables us to feel the strength of having more than one pair of

hands, being able to achieve so much more than alone. It also enables us to experience the combination of trust and responsibility: Those who sign away their personal wishes and beliefs trust in others. Those who adopt and accept people following, assume responsibility for not only their own actions, but also those of their followers.

At a group level, power enables groups to move forward: The group can take decisions and develop coordinated actions that last. It can implement strategies that reach beyond first signs of things going wrong or failing. Groups which are unable to establish power relationships, and where the first one to call for action is denounced or ignored or otherwise punished, will not be able to achieve anything.

How The Dimensions Shape The Space

The theory says these three dimensions relate to each other in a permanent meta process: The group wanders dynamically in its focus between the dimensions. Just as humans have the tendency to make sense of a situation, groups do too.

We understand this process as being very dynamic: Focus can shift quickly, or it can stay for hours like the infamous "elephant in the room": Unresolved dimensions tend to come back over and over again.

We can also understand the space between the three axes as the space which is accessible to the group in a given moment: Which span and which dynamics of (for example) power can be sustained? The larger the space which the group "allows", the better the ability of the group to regulate itself.

We have to bear in mind that this is a mostly implicit process: Only on rare occasions is the group aware of its

wandering between the dimensions. People mostly follow their affections and instincts. They work hard to make sense of a situation, in order to reduce the emotional pressure and feel more at ease. This feeds Lewin's interdependent "field", making the group move. Some dimensions might be more dominant in typical phases like the beginning or the end of a group process, although the theory of the group dynamic space is not a phase theory: It does not describe a specific process, but a space for a process which develops individually in every group. This is what makes every group unique.

Let's move on from theory to practice. How can we make the unconscious and unspoken visible? We did this through a process of action and reflection at the ANSE Summer University by using the T-Group format.

The Training Group

Training groups (in short: T-groups) were developed accidentally: In 1946, Kurt Lewin conducted workshops against inter-racial prejudices between the Black and the Jewish community in the USA – the later famous "Connecticut Experiments". In a session break, the staff was reflecting on the group process, when participants first came to listen and then to join in. So, the staff decided to continue this joint reflection in session – the T-group was born, as "a type of action-research, a comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action" (Lewin 1946, p.35).

This research and practice were continued in the US-based National Training Laboratories (NTL), mainly focusing on leadership issues. Other scholars in the 1960's imported group dynamic practice into Germany as a means to re-democratise postwar Germany (König, 2007). In Lewin's tradition, pioneers in psychology, sociology, education, anthropology, psychiatry, and philosophy explored the

development of small groups with the goal of enhancing democratic values and implementing techniques for self-examination and feedback. The insights gained in the process have found their way far beyond the academic sphere, namely in organisational development programmes (Adelman, 1993). This multiple development was possible, because Lewin always saw this work from three perspectives: research, democratisation and learning.

In a T-Group, participants come together for a delimited time for experience-based learning. As a rule, a T-group consists of 8 to 14 people for the duration of several days up to one week. The T-Group does not have an explicit agenda or goal. As a consequence, the group members struggle to deal with this lack of structure and their behaviour becomes the focus of the T-group. The trainers' task is to support the participants in the exploration of the different parts of themselves and their effect on their fellow participants. The trainer holds back to the extent that he or she does not prescribe topics, but only intervenes to encourage the group members to share their emotional reactions that arise in the face of their fellow participants' statements and actions, and to reflect their role and contribution to the movement and development of the group.

The T-Group In A Nutshell

The aim of our workshop in Budapest was to experience the group dynamic space. For that purpose we set up a T-Group format to allow the participants to explore themselves in "the here and now" of this specific group.

Classical T-groups need time to form and to evolve – time we did not have. So we applied an experimental form of the classic T-group, both in terms of time and number of participants – a "T-Group in a nutshell". We facilitated two T-groups with 9 and 10 participants each and

a duration of 15 minutes. Such short T-groups are anything but usual and in fact not suitable for the experience of real group development and profound self-examination. They are, however, quite useful for self-awareness, as we could determine from our own experience in a training session with Gilmore Crosby, an US-American group dynamics trainer, who learned his craft from his father Robert, a later student and collaborator of Kurt Lewin. Crosby proved to us that ultra-short T-Group sequences – some of which lasted only a few minutes - were very insightful. However, this experiment was embedded in a multi-day group dynamic training with experts in that field.

The use of these mini-T-groups in our workshop context was also a field of experimentation for us, where we trusted that supervisors would engage in this unusual setting with curiosity and an open mind.

The Budapest Experiment

We first asked the participants to choose a mutual sparring partner in a non-verbal process. This in itself is an important intervention, as it directly affects the dynamics of the subsequent T-Group. We asked the participants to stand up, recommended them to move around to sense the space, and to observe what happens in the selection of their partners. We recommended that they take their time to re-adjust their selection until they felt at ease. Already this is the moment where all the mixed feelings of group formation stand out unspoken. One wonders: "Who do I want to join? Do I choose my sparring partner, or do I wait for someone to ask me? How can I get in contact with the others? How can I connect in the here and now?"

From our perspective, this process was completed very fast. This may be interpreted as an indication that the

group participants were still very cautious in this forming phase. They hold back and do not openly differentiate. They might still pretend that one can get along with everyone equally well.

Then we asked the couples to choose who would be participants in the T-group first. Next, we invited them to sit in two concentric circles: participants inside, observers outside. After the participants were seated, the T-group started. For this first round we offered a guiding question:

"How can I get in contact with the others? How do I connect in the here and now?"

We also defined the criteria for the observers:

- *Mindfully observe verbal and non-verbal communication of your sparring-partner. How does she or he contribute to the group?*
- *Consider and perceive your own thoughts, impulses, body sensations and emotions.*
- *Don't intervene in the T-group.*

And as for us as trainers, we chose to hold back and sat down in the outer circle. We made it clear that we were responsible for the time and spatial framework of the T-group and that we wouldn't intervene from the outside and would solely observe the process.

Within this agreed framework, the T-group got into action quite quickly. The only male participant took the floor first and emphasised that he did so contrary to his nature. As is typical for the first group phase, participants turned to us trainers and asked us for support and guidance to check if they understood the leading question correctly and to clarify who would supervise the time. We pointed out that these were exactly the issues that the group would have to negotiate. That led to a short discussion

about who would set the time. Someone pointed out that the trainers would remind the group anyway. As such, no-one committed to a specific role such as timekeeper. Then one participant shared how she felt about the process. Another participant said it would be helpful for her to make contact by doing a round of introductions with everyone's name and origin. Here the T-group was divided into people who wanted to take up this suggestion and others who thought that it would be more interesting to discuss how they experience this group in the here and now, to share about self-perception and perception by others. So it went back and forth. This is where the first episode of the power dimension emerged – who prevails and how? After this first round the participants and their observers had ten minutes to reflect on the process and give feedback.

After the lunch break, we started the second part of the workshop with an entry round to share the main findings from the first T-group. The participants were eager to get into action and start the second T-Group in opposite roles – the observers from round one were to participate in the T-Group, while the others were to observe them.

We did not specify any questions for the second T-Group. Naturally, this one was characterised by the observations from the first round. One person expressed his excitement and that it was unusual for him to express his emotions in a group. One participant suggested standing up and holding hands. All group participants except one stood up, some more reluctantly than others. One participant unsuccessfully tried to motivate the person who remained seated to join in. The group gave in and sat down again – an episode of successful resistance. The discussion switched from perceptions from the “here and now” to individual past experiences non-related to the group. This is a strategy to relieve the tension. One person remained silent

during the whole T-group phase. Afterwards, the sparring partners had again ten minutes to share their observations and experiences.

Then we asked the participants to form small groups to reflect on how they contributed to shaping the group dynamic space. We assume that we all have competencies to regulate the group dynamic space – we have to explore and discover them in order to develop them further. These are the competencies the participants collected:

Courage, empathy, initiation, presence, observing, listening to silence and working on silence, good listener, confidence, acceptance, assertiveness, flexibility, patience, keeper of structure, bringing in “the elephant in the room”.

In the final plenary session, we discussed the main insights and the transfer for our supervision practice. The participants shared even more experiences that they did not express in the T-group. In the reflection, it was possible to discuss which impulses for action were given and which were not, for example, how one person in the group kept silent and felt bored by what was happening. This might be an example of alienation, not feeling fully belonging, or an example of resistance against power. Two sparring partners revealed that they explicitly chose to sit next to each other, which gave them a sense of security. Here, intimacy and closeness were experienced directly, even if it was initially unspoken in the group. And of course, the question of power also became visible, namely who sets the topic of the T-Group, who follows, who opposes. All three dimensions of the group dynamic space could thus be experienced.

Application in Supervision

“There is nothing as practical as a good theory” – a quote attributed to Kurt Lewin. A theory is helpful – not as

guidance to act, but guidance to see: Theories help us to interpret the chaos our five senses pick up. We all have theories about group dynamics – if we cannot name them, they are implicit and unknown. Nevertheless, they guide our perception and interventions.

The group dynamic space is not a method. It is a diagnostic instrument to peek into the complex social interactions and how they relate to well-being and performance. We are able to develop hypotheses on the inner functioning of a group in a given situation. We are not different from group members in this aspect: Everyone in the group thinks about the group. As supervisors are trained for it and less concentrated on what the group does, we can have more focus on how. It is then a question of supporting the group in its internal abilities to develop and perform. Here, we supervisors are at a crossroads:

- Following a systemic mindset, we could confront the group with the unspoken in an attempt to evoke discussion about it.
- Following the group dynamic mindset, we would not necessarily share our observations. We might call out a taboo in the container, which is not yet ready to be seen, and risk unnecessary resistance. We would rather intervene in a way that the group can work on it by itself – acting, not telling.

Imagine a group which consciously or unconsciously avoids the dimension of power. We might think this, because few people propose anything, and those who do, meet resistance or silence. Such a group is unable to decide anything. Supporting the group in establishing a differentiated view on trust, leading, following and accountability might enable them to explore the benefit of power, make decisions and move on.

And finally, how can we do that? Many people blame group dynamics for not providing readymade tools. There is a lot of truth in that. Working with groups is less “having a tool”, but rather “being a tool”. Most group dynamic skills are rooted in practice and attitude, formed through the combination of theory, training and reflection. Any time is the right time to start and practise this capacity building process, even a 15 minute “T-group in a nutshell”. ■

Further Reading

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