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The Formation of Objects in the Group Matrix: Reflections on Creative Therapy With Clay

Gary Winship & Rex Haigh (1998) *Group Analysis*, 31: 71-81

In this article describes an experimental group experience where five people worked in silence for 20 minutes around a 2 it square slate using clay as a medium for communication as part of a creative therapy session on an inpatient psychiatric ward. The interaction culminated in a group sculpt. It is suggested that the process of the sculpting may throw some light on the formation of objects in the unconscious group matrix. The article is intended as a contribution towards the debate about the potential symbiosis between group analysis and the creative therapies (Waller) as well as the basis for further investigation into Rey's question about the formation of group matrix.

Key words: creative therapies, group matrix, group sculpt

Introduction

At the beginning of a group, members often sit silently looking at the floor, occasionally reporting that their minds are blank. In a recent group, following a silent beginning, one member said that he found himself making shapes out of the patterns in the carpet. The group matrix consists of unspoken or unconscious material as well as the communication that is articulated through words: 'Words are the chief vehicle of communication of articulate (secondary thought), but it is the process of communication itself which specially interests us, not the factual transmission of information through words' (Foulkes and Anthony, 1965: 259). Might we take from this that a substantial matrix may form in the silence of non-verbal communication as the space becomes a crucible for metaphor and symbols? In thinking further about this non verbal shaping of experience, we may also wonder what

shape the silent group matrix might take if we were to make it visible? One might ask then how are objects formed in the space of the group matrix? Rey (1994) has commented that the question as to how objects are formed in external and inner space represents an exciting avenue for future investigation in the discourse of object-relations theory. If we direct our interest towards the unspoken dynamics of non-verbal communication therefore, as Foulkes suggests, are we more likely to clarify the question of conceptualizing unconscious activity and the formation of objects in the group matrix? Observing the group is rather like looking into the surface of a lake or a pond where one can sometimes see only reflections. However if one looks into and beyond the surface then it is apparent that there is life beneath. Similarly one has to look beyond the silent surface of a group to see what is occurring in the unconscious life of the group. Abercrombie (1969) used a similar metaphor for describing the unconscious matrix of the group. She said that 'superficially the group has no obvious structure or palpable texture; it may seem

formless, embedded in an intangible, floating vagueneess' (Abercrombie, 1969: 146). However, for Abercrombie, Monet's impressionist series of paintings of lilies in his pond (on show at The National Gallery in London) depicted something of the interchange between (i) surface/conscious (the lilies and the water), (ii) surface/reflection (the sky and the clouds as they appeared on the surface of the pond) and (iii) below the surface (unconscious). In response to Abercrombie's theory, Dr Foulkes said that whilst
she had identified something important about the experience in the group he felt that there was something limiting about the static image presented in art forms. He said: 'I am particularly interested in theoretical issues and see these dynamically. I do not see them pictorially, but I see them dynamically and moving. I would need moving models to construct to make this clear' (in Abercrombie, 1969: 149-50).

The question that Foulkes raises about viewing a static image is an important point here. In support of Abercrombie one might say that viewing an image does involve a moving dynamic, simply in the eye of the viewer. In art appreciation people talk about the painting as 'flowing' or 'perspective shifting' depending where the viewer feels they are looking from. In this way the dynamic interchange between art form and viewer could be said to have a moving dynamic force. Artistic representation as psychic symbol-

-ization has been discussed by some psychoanalytic theoreticians (Rose, 1980; Krauss, 1994). The recent advent of three-dimensional (3-D) art seems particularly apposite when it comes to thinking about how an unseen matrix or object might emerge in a picture. With 3-D pictures, at first one can only see a surface pattern of colours, no shape is apparent and the picture appears to be two-dimensional. With practice and perseverance one can develop an ability to relax and look almost beyond the surface of the picture, where a 3-D image appears. The image emerges upwards, apparently from nothing. This experience is quite uncanny, particularly because one does not always know what image will emerge. It is also the case that the harder one tries to see beyond the surface of the 2-D pattern the less likely you are to see the 3-D image. This is how it is with the unconscious - it is more common that in our most relaxed state of sleep we are able to see the unconscious depicted.

But if we think of the unconscious as only being awakened by sleep then the unconscious mental activity involved in day- dreaming, for instance, is underestimated. In a group, the conscious interaction, a sequelae of symbols and images, forms a basis for the group matrix, but this conscious activity is nonetheless underpinned by unconscious mental activity (Kutter, 1982). So, what of the mental activity that plumbs the deeper layers of group process, perhaps a collective past unconscious (Sandler and Sandler, 1994)? How might we understand the role of object formation in these layers of the unconscious group matrix?

The matrix starts from nothing. An empty room does not have a matrix, yet as soon as people enter a room an intricate mesh of communications occurs. No words need be spoken and often the silence has a texture; people describe feeling as if they could 'cut the atmosphere'. Pedder (1977) has drawn a comparison

between the silent tension at the beginning of a therapy session and the tension of waiting for the drama of a play to unfold in a theatre, suggesting that the silent tension may be conducive in creating the right milieu for therapy to take place. The mutual floor space in group therapy becomes a stage for a dramatic encounter where the interpersonal space becomes a focal point for transferential !1nd object-relational interchange (Balint, 1950).

Therapy using creative mediums might be conceivably seen as a paradigm of adult interactive play therapy. Often the experience takes place in silence, sometimes offering an unexpected catharsis

or route to the patients' unconscious. Segal (1991) sees that art offers a road to unconscious representation: 'certain phenomena and activities aim more directly at the expression, elaboration, and symbolization of unconscious phantasies. Not only night dreams, but also day dreams, play, and art, fall under this heading' (p. 101). Art offers a reflective bridge between the conscious and the unconscious. In this context art appears to have a waking dream-like quality, and, when adequately embraced by an understanding therapist, it has the potential to help patients deal with difficult and baffling emotions much in the same way as Bettelheim (1976) believed that fairy tales had the potential to help people deal with unconscious anxiety regarding death, separation and the balance between good and evil.

If it is the case that individual artistic expression offers a pathway to the unconscious, then does a group art experience offer a pathway to the group's unconscious? Group art therapy is still at an experimental stage of investigation. The discourse between group analysis and art therapy, however, has reached an important stage recently with Waller's (1993) book about group interactive art, which has been referred to as 'the first art therapy book to address using concrete imagery in psychodynamic groups' (Mcneilly, 1995: 242). We would like to present an experimental session where a group engaged in a creative activity where aspects of the formation of objects (Rey, 1994) in the group matrix might be considered.

Group Session with Clay

A slate, 2 ft square, was placed on a small table, about waist high, and five chairs were placed around the table. Participants were patients C, M and D and co-therapists J and G. Each participant began with approximately a double handful of clay. The group worked in silence for 20 minutes. The only remit at the commencement of the group was that of producing a group sculpt. The atmosphere was tense at first and the first 2 minutes featured only the occasional prodding or fiddling with individual lumps of clay. Participants looked rather anxiously at the empty slate base. After about 3 minutes G flattened out a small oval shaped base shape which was placed to the right of centre of the slate. C put a cube shape on top. Another base, larger this time, resembling a receptacle or bowl, was placed near the centre by D. Further bases became the recipients of a series of objects that all had quite distinctive primary ~

FIGURE 1

shapes such as cubes, cones, spheres. M made a small triangle, others added some rolled sausage shapes. After about 7 minutes D moulded a large, bland, headlike shape with indentations to represent mouth, eyes and ears and placed it resolutely on the remaining space on the slate base. A flurry of activity followed. The shapes became more intricate. Soon there were two little creatures with torso and legs, then some flowers. The reticence about placing objects on other objects seemed to lessen as the group began busily to add and mould on each others' objects. After 12 minutes or so, for the first time, there were a series of sequences when there were several hands on the sculpt at the same time. The objects continued to be more definite in shape, and became more recognizable: snakes, flowers, a snail, intricate sproutings. C put a baby or a small human figure in another receptacle. Then more fauna appeared. After 15 minutes a few inanimate objects once again began to reappear. A pipe was attached to the head by M. D trailed a line from the top of the head to the outskirts of the sculpt. Lightbulb-like decorations were

attached to the line. C added a cross to a sphere. D made a slab with an equation of figures, a sum that did not add up. M placed a golf tee on the slate. G made a slab with the date. J said the time was almost up. G put a hat on top of the head and C added a feather-like extension (see Figure 1). In the discussion that followed everyone agreed that they were surprised at the activity following the initial reticence at the beginning. Some comparisons were made with the sharing of the space in the sculpt experience and the sharing of the space in the three times a week small psychotherapy group sessions on the ," unit. D said how difficult he had found it watching others attach things to the objects he had placed on the sculpt. There was much discussion about the linking and placing of objects in and on top of other objects. As the session moved to a close, C said she wondered if the piece needed a name. D said it looked like a garden. C said, 'The Garden of Eden?' It was felt that the Garden of Eden was too ideal and the sculpt looked much more chaotic. 'Bedlam and Mayhem' was suggested (with reference to a visit to the Bethlem Royal Hospital archives the previous week, where the group had looked at paintings by Richard Dadd and Louis Wain among others).! M said he thought it should be called 'The Struggle for Change' because this was what treatment at the unit had meant for him. The suggestions were moulded together to form the final title for the sculpt: 'The Struggle for Change in the Garden of Mayhem'.

The Group Matrix in Clay?

Was there a process discernible in the way the sculpt emerged that might inform us about the formation of the group matrix? Clay, although an established material for use in therapy (Brock, 1991), is perhaps less popular than paint. As a medium it appears to resemble excrement (the cold and clammy version rather than warm and soft) thus participants are confronted with a resonance of infantile feelings. In an interesting article by Helle Munro (1970) from her days at Belmont, where she used sugar and clay in a group with schizophrenics, Munro found that the clay was symbolic of food and faeces in the play of the patients. There was often schizoid confusion in the patient's mind about which was the good food to eat, the sugar or

the clay. Imbued with a multiplicity of meaning, the clay came to symbolize gifts as well as excreta. Munro (1970)

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pointed out that the play was therapeutic insofar as creativity was encouraged where the bad objects could be expelled (thrown on to the floor) but then returned by the therapists in a more acceptable form which she described as a concrete representation of the process of re-introjection. Working with clay in a group is therefore likely to resonate with the group's unconscious layer of functioning (Kutter, 1982). In this case the group process emerged from a network of non-verbal communication that may have resonated with pre-verbal processes. Initially, the objects produced were flat, followed by those that were familiar in their shape - square, triangular and conical. These may have emerged from a wish for familiarity in the uncertainty of the experience of the silence at the beginning. The sharing of basic shapes became a secure base for the development of more elaborate shapes.

As the group progressed, the objects became more elaborate still, and the positioning of the head seemed to be emblematic of the process of more sophisticated thinking. The blocks to object formation at the beginning were superseded by creative activity which resulted in increasingly intricate shapes and forms that appeared to symbolize the creation of life as flora and fauna emerged concomitantly.

There appeared to be an evolutionary process that occurred in the group. Mter the initial (primary) shapes, there were a number of receptacles generated which gave the impression of a germination! womb-like phase that preceded the phase where life forms emerged. A baby was placed in one of the bowl-like shapes. The later phase of the sculpt saw the return of the inorganic shapes that had featured initially. In a sense the group began with the inorganic, produced life and finally returned to the inorganic with the headstone, a plate with the date on it, a cross, a hat and a pipe. The placing of a cross and a headstone with the date on it, gave the impression of death and mourning as the activity moved towards its close. The placing of a pipe in the mouth appeared near the end of the group sculpt, possibly symbolic of not only adult comfort but also maturation and old age.

Discussion

To some extent the group clay sculpt might be said to depict something of the network of non-verbal communication that took

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place in the group. Whether one is then able to say something about the unconscious matrix of the group from this group sculpt is another matter. The group matrix is not a solid concrete mass and an attempt to look at it topographically will fall short of explaining the nuances and texture of interaction. However, Rey has noted that the internal object in the paranoid/schizoid level of development is treated very much as the external object 'because of its concrete '" sensori-like characteristics' (1994: 196). The early tactile experiences in our life are characterized by textures - we feel shapes and then taste shapes (experience them in our mouths) before we can see ..o~~ them. The early experience of mental construction, the formation of objects, may be built on the textural/sensual

experience of shape, form and mass. Possibly the early experience of hearing is conceived also in terms of a shape. A template for this architecture of the unconscious is Tustin's (1980, 1984) description of autistic shapes and objects derived from early experiences of hardness, coldness, bounded surfaces in infancy of self and environment, but also influenced by the warm rhythmicity of mother including her skin, tones of enunciations, breath and silence. Shapes in infancy, then, are morphologically unfolded from the ceaseless exchange of experience, becoming recognizable as the intercourse between subjectivity and creativity becomes sophisticated and objects become recognizable. The group sculpt experience appeared to offer some insight into the way that shapes evolve in the collective drama of the matrix through a process of amalgamation. At a symbolic level, might it be said that the sculpt was an exemplar of how the interpersonal group matrix forms layer upon layer, each new acquisition of an object contributing to the overall matrix of the group? Whilst the individual parts may be discernible, there is an overall mass that ~:§ emerges. Anzieu (1984) has suggested that the group unconscious has an osmotic membrane, where there is a flow between the unconscious and conscious matrix of the group. There did appear to be a sense of 'flow' in the group sculpt as objects fused with other objects, where the conglomeration of conscious and unconscious activity had a moving dynamic force. However, rather than appearing osmotic, as Anzieu describes, the group sculpt gave a sense of an anaerobic matrix, unbreathing, constructed in a rather geographical manner, giving the impression of a landscape as much as anything else.

There are some similarities between the phenomenon of 3-D art,

mentioned earlier, and the group sculpt experience. The form/shape emerges from a fiat two-dimensional base, essentially from nothing, rising upwards. The shape becomes multidimensional, perceived in both space and matter - is this similar to Balint's (1968) idea of philobatic and ocnophilic object relations? Upon viewing, the sculpt lent itself well to a moving dynamic force as one was able to look through the sculpt and move imaginatively between the objects (although Foulkes might not have been convinced about this assertion!). It would seem that the object formation of individuals contributed to the group-as-a-whole object formation. rhe shapeless chaos of the latent unconscious group matrix became manifest in the shape of the sculpt. The group sculpt seemed to depict something of the process of concretizing thoughts into symbols, perhaps in order to tolerate the unbearable experience of the thought chaos at the beginning of the group, a process which Bion (1962) has described, where thinking emerges in order to deal with thoughts. It would appear that the objects which were formed in the matrix of the group become part of the identity of the group symbolized in the naming of the sculpt during the discussion. Is this how a group culture is established, where early objects become common reference points for the development of group history and identity, where symbols become the basis for artistic genres?

Therapeutic Value

In Abercrombie's *Anatomy of Judgement* (1960), she began developing some of her ideas about the way in which visual sense emerges from visual chaos. She refers to some psychological tests such as the 'Hidden Man' (Porter, 1957), describing this

image as a 'meaningless patchwork of blotches' (1960: 27) until a figure emerges. Abercrombie's discussion suggests that chaos pre-dates the possibility of sense a collage of blurs and shapes ill-defined followed by a differentiating process. This seems apposite in the context of Gabrielle Rifkind's (1995) article in *Group Analysis,* when she talks about the artistic process of 'tolerating the chaos' before a created piece emerges. She applies this to the therapeutic process in a group where the therapist provides a 'frame' within which the chaos matrix can be contained. However, contrary to Rifkind's notion of framing, the group sculpt experience showed that the group itself framed the matrix as the participants constructed familiar primary shapes and receptacles before creating

more elaborate figures - it could be said that the therapists provided a *base* rather than a *frame.* Ritkind's concept of 'holding the frame' (1995: 336), which she derives from the notion that the individual artist creates the boundaries for their creativity *(artistic individualism?),* is helpful in thinking about how feeling and anxiety might be contained in the therapeutic process. But this idea would seem to be too simplified as a template for describing group process. It would seem to be more exacting to conceive of a group theory of artistic production *(artistic collectivism?)* and then apply the findings to group process. We are of course working from the assumption here that the fount of creativity, namely, early eye contact, smiling, making noises and other primary intersubjective phenomena - is fundamentally a shared experience between infant and parent that arises out of early mirroring (Pines, 1985). It would certainly be interesting to observe further group sculpts like the one-off experiment described here.

Notes

1. Fonner inmates of the Bethlem Royal Hospital in the mid-19th century. Richard Dadd, believed to have been schizophrenic, was convicted of the murder of his father in 1843. He painted finely detailed fairy-tale pictures. His painting 'The Fairy Feller's Master Stroke', completed in 1864 whilst at Bethlem, is now in the

Tate Gallery, London. Louis Wain is now generally regarded as having been a manic-depressive. The majority of his work comprises pictures of sedate-looking cats painted in bright, vivid colours.

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