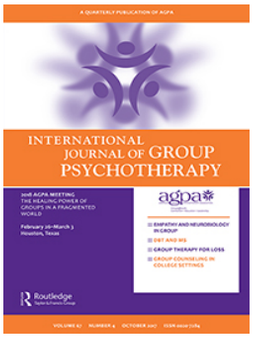

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BOOK REVIEW

From the Couch to the Circle: Group-Analytic Psychotherapy in Practice. By John R. Schlapobersky. London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2016, 491 pp., $51.32.

"…a whole climate of opinion."
In memory of Sigmund Freud
W. H. Auden 1917–1973

The climate of European group analysis has been evolving for the past 75 years. John Schlapobersky's book takes us on a journey from its beginnings through the many countries where it has taken root. I, Dale C. Godby, a certified group psychotherapist and full member of the Group Analytic Society International, have been traveling to this "undiscover'd country" of group analysis since the 1990s. To add a multigenerational perspective on Schlapobersky's work, I invited Jason S. Berman, a younger colleague, also a certified group psychotherapist and an advanced candidate in psychoanalysis, to review this book with me. Jason and I both grew up in a North American tradition of group psychotherapy, studying Yalom (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), Rutan (Rutan, Stone, & Shay, 2014), Ormont (1992), and Corey (2016). What does group analysis offer that is not found in the North American tradition? Let's find out.

The depth and breadth of group analysis covered in this book demonstrates that one can spend a whole career in group work without exhausting the excitement, intellectual stimulation, and therapeutic potential that groups offer. In fact, Schlapobersky has spent a lifetime studying, conducting, teaching, and writing about groups. Context is crucially important in group analysis. Schlapobersky's personal context is having Lithuanian grandparents and arriving in the UK as a political refugee from South Africa via Israel. Foulkes, the

founder of group analysis, was also a refugee, from Germany to the UK. The immigrant experience is vitally alive in the group analytic movement, and it fosters a deep form of empathy. Schlapobersky frames group analysis as providing a home amongst strangers and a transformational space where longing can become belonging. Psychoanalysis has been described as a survivor of the Holocaust. Group analysis can be seen as being born out of the Holocaust with its founder, Foulkes, fleeing the Nazis and immigrating to the UK. Like many births, the ancestry of group analysis is rich with contributions from sociology, Gestalt psychology, and psychoanalysis.

A further piece of context, which helps to locate Schlapobersky's work, is his years of involvement with the extensive trainings of the Institute of Group Analysis in London and abroad. The Institute of Group Analysis offers a range of training opportunities, the most comprehensive of which lasts five or more years, including membership in a twice-weekly therapy group, large group experiences, academic course work, supervision, and a qualifying essay. One of the difficulties and rewards of this book is that it contains a life's work, so to encounter all that is available can initially be overwhelming. However, if one is willing to stay with it, a lifetime of knowledge and experience can be absorbed in a relatively brief time. Like in travel, one trip to Europe can't do it justice. Reading a good travel guide can help, but using that guide over a lifetime can deepen one's journey on every visit.

Conductor is the usual designation given by group analysts to what many Americans refer to as the group therapist or group leader. Conductor was an intentional choice by Foulkes who spoke German and did not want to use *führer*, the German word for leader, because of its association with Hitler. The musical connection is salient in that variations in rhythm, tone, or key can bring about change (p. 38). In some cases the conductor can be seen as a poet. *From the Couch to the Circle* begins with an epigraph by Foulkes saying that the conductor's role is similar to the poet's in the community in that they both are "receptive to the current problems of the time and creative in expressing them." Here is an example of Foulkes's own poetry: "The language of the symptom [which] although already a form of communication, is autistic. It mumbles to itself secretly, hoping to be overheard" (p. 119). Foulkes is a frequent voice throughout the

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book. His contributions are valued and extended in this textbook more than anywhere else.

The book offers substantial depth and myriad resources for teaching. The 68 vignettes bring vitality to the group analytic concepts, and the 60 tables and 26 figures he includes are valuable learning and teaching aids. Some key guideposts follow. *Structure, process*, and *content* are a part of every group. Through dynamic administration, it is the conductor's responsibility to structure the group. The conductor chooses the group members, sets the time and place of the group, arranges the chairs, and sets the fee policy. The process and content of the group unfolds with attention paid to the 3 R's of the *relational, reflective*, and *reparative*. "Psychotherapy offers someone a therapeutic *relationship* to help them develop a *reflective* understanding of themselves and others through which *reparation* can promote healing, growth and change" (p. 59).

The language of the group can be thought to occur in the three domains of *monologue, dialogue*, and *discourse*. The group analytic conductor values all three of these domains and functions to move the group from monologue to dialogue and then from dialogue to discourse. It is in discourse that the power of the group shines. In discourse, "the group works like a chorus in an ancient drama, challenging private deceits with public recognition and confirming private recognitions with public affirmation" (p. 131). In the group, "Language is working to generate mutative metaphors that come in a moment and last a lifetime" (p. 131).

"The lived experience of change in group therapy arises when people struggle with what it means to give and receive generosity; when gratitude gains over grievance" (p. 67). Schlapobersky illustrates reparation as "making good after an injury," which is vividly personified by Jean Valjean of *Les Miserables*. Valjean turns from a "felon to a benefactor when he is saved from a desperate predicament" and then turns his indebtedness and gratitude into the benefit of others. I (JSB) think of the inspector, Javert, who doggedly pursues the newly benevolent Valjean as analogous to inner conflicts of self-condemnation that can be shared (relational), non-judgmentally talked about (reflective), and eventually healed (reparation) within a group.

All groups begin with what Foulkes referred to as the current level. Foulkes saw group occurring on four levels: *current, transference,*

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projective, and *primordial*. Schlapobersky conceives of them as domains, and like a hologram you can see each of these domains as you look through one into the other. You begin and end with the current domain, but the conductor's intervention will depend on which domain is governing the group at any particular therapeutic moment.

Schlapobersky examines developmental issues for the individual and the group. He sees the stages of group as circular rather than linear while the group moves through different phases, facilitating individual development. For example, as the group deals with the critical issue of who is in and who is out, an individual's developmental issues of engagement, commitment, and security may emerge and be worked through.

In a group, each member spends the majority of the time silent rather than talking. Schlapobersky devotes a chapter to speech and silence and explores in depth how silence can be a retreat or an advance. Paradoxically, words can stimulate silence and reverie, which can draw patients to their silent, inner core, fostering renewal. In the unspoken, silence can help bring words of understanding, and unspeakable words can engender silence, revealing the core of distress. Silence is explored in its multiple dimensions. One dimension that is rarely faced is the sweet sorrow of "the silence of not knowing what happens in the subsequent lives of our former patients" (p. 138).

Group analysis emphasizes the slow, open, twice-weekly group across a few years. Much of group analytic theory has been mined from this type of group and has now been applied to a wide range of durations, frequencies, and settings. Another feature pioneered by group analysis is the block group in which, for example, training or therapy might be offered monthly in blocks of 9–12 hours. Schlapobersky presents a wide variety of patient experiences in detail: groups for survivors of torture, people who have committed murder, sexual offenders, and survivors of sexual abuse, to name some. All of these groups are conducted and written about within a group analytic context. The group analytic understanding of median and large groups is also addressed along with useful recommendations about how to conduct them.

Following the descriptions of group analytic theory and practice, Schlapobersky describes six psychodynamic models of group psychotherapy and compares them to the group analytic model: interpersonal, modern analytic, modern psychoanalysis, psychodynamic,

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systemic, and Tavistock approaches. Admittedly, this is a preliminary study, but it illustrates Schlapobersky's efforts to be comprehensive and learn from all orientations.

Another chapter is devoted to the conductor. It confirms what he says earlier in the book, "that going to work as a group analyst is a privilege every day" (p. 3). He sees the conductor's primary job as equipping the people to "play" safely with human experience and do so across its widest range of emotions. The chapter is filled with advice to aspiring group analysts, which he suggests they forget after reading it. This suggestion is in service of encouraging spontaneity and authenticity. The conductor's role is described as convenor, therapist, and group member. The conductor's responsibilities are clearly outlined across phases of the group's development where there is a crescendo and decrescendo of the conductor's contributions, which are dictated by the group's needs.

In what Schlapobersky calls the heart of the group-analytic model, *location, translation*, and *interpretation* are examined in depth. He locates disturbances as inherently occurring among people and never confined to a single member alone. The location of disturbances in the group context always includes the conductor, whose job it is to take the total configuration into mind before translating and interpreting what is going on. As much as possible, the conductor makes space for the group members to do the work and intervenes when communication is blocked. Tables and figures are included to clarify some of Foulkes's writing on these topics, and guidance is given as to how and when to translate and interpret as well as what forms of interpretation to avoid.

We do have a few criticisms and suggestions for future editions. When we read the title *From the Couch to the Circle*, we were anticipating some guidance on when to recommend the couch and when the circle—one, both, and what sequence, if any, is ideal? I (DCG) remember hearing Meg Sharpe, the first woman to join the group analytic practice in London, express an attitude that is foreign to many Americans: "that a group can work for most people but only some can benefit from individual." In a paper read before the British Psychoanalytical Society, Foulkes says: "As a matter of fact Group Analysis is far less but also far more than a Psycho-Analysis in groups" (Foulkes, 1946, p. 46). An exploration of the more and the less of

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group analysis would be helpful. When to start with group, when individual, when to use couples, and when to use family therapy? Also, the value of individual psychoanalysis has not been explored. Individual psychoanalysis has also evolved for the better over 70 years, an evolution Schlapobersky doesn't emphasize. The argument could be made that the couch has been undersold and the circle oversold.

Schlapobersky gives the last word in the book to some of the patients who gave consent for use in the 68 vignettes. Their comments are a moving and fitting capstone to the book, and they resonate with the words of Foulkes and Anthony quoted earlier: "The group is treated for the sake of its individual members, and for no other reason. All psychotherapy is, in the last resort, treatment of the individual" (p. 51).

From the Couch to the Circle is a comprehensive book that spans the birth and development of group analysis. Reading the book has deepened my (DCG) thinking about my groups and the ones I supervise. I'm involved in a residency program where the residents get a few weeks of instruction before starting to run their own groups. Because this allows so little time for teaching, we don't think *From the Couch to the Circle* would be the best place to introduce beginners to group analysis. Schlapobersky cites two other works, which, while not as comprehensive as *From the Couch to the Circle*, seem to us to be an easier place for new students to begin their journey into group analysis: Kennard, Roberts, and Winter (1993) or Behr and Hearst (2005)

This book will be a resource for the life and practice of any group therapist. It offers a model of group psychotherapy that is little known and infrequently covered in the North American tradition. *From the Couch to the Circle* will undoubtedly deepen and strengthen the work of anyone willing to dig in, comprehend, and assimilate what is offered. Again, as Schlapobersky says, the book cannot substitute for being in a group and conducting group analysis under supervision and training. Nevertheless, it serves as a comprehensive resource for anyone interested in groups. It will be a service to teaching, supervision, and practice for years to come.

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