

Perinatal Process in Group Dynamic

[An Analytic Response to the Article: 'Wars and Rumours of Wars' by Howard F. Stein, published in the Journal of Psychohistory, Vol.7, No.4, Spring 1990, pp. 379-401. - Xerox copies of the original article may be ordered from Xerox University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48104, USA, to whom queries regarding costs should be addressed.]

"In December 1979, the Chair of the Department of Community Health, University of ----- Medical School, contacted each of his seven faculty members to arrange a two-day faculty retreat for early January 1980. The purpose of the retreat was to decide on agendas, priorities, and the organization of the newly created department. The faculty consisted of eight members, four from a unit also called Community Health (CH) which had existed for some six months, and four from a New Health Practitioner (NHP) program which had existed as a free-standing unit for the same period. Until early summer of 1979, both had been subdivisions of an immense department with a prohibitively lengthy name. Suffice it to say that administrative fiat resulted in separate units. Beginning in December 1979, the rejoining of the NHP program and the department of CH was being negotiated." [p.383]

The article by Howard Stein represents an analysis of the process and unconscious phantasies which emerged within that two-day meeting. He uses the tools of "Fantasy Analysis" increasingly familiar from the work of the Institute of Psycho-History and indeed devotes the first two pages to an exposition of the methodology and its assumptions before pressing on to the analysis of the group process itself. In the second half of the article Stein discusses the material which has emerged and concludes with a note examining the parallelism between processes and myths developed within the small group and those dominating at a national level during the same period.

Stein bases his discussion on the traditional terms of Freudian, post-natal analysis, with its stress on castration anxiety, homosexual dread and oedipal conflict. This responsive critique explores the possibility of widening his assumptions to include an understanding of unconscious group process in terms of pre and perinatal psychology. Initially, several extended quotations from the article are given in order to familiarise readers with the concepts and functions of group phantasy and the methodology of its detection and analysis. The extracts are interspersed with critical comments, examining the implications of widening the assumptive base to include the defences against anxiety laid down in common perinatal trauma. The application of this critical widening of the assumptive base is then worked out in greater detail with reference to the main body of the article.

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On the purpose and definition of group phantasy:

"The very purpose of group-fantasies is to deny painful reality and to substitute for it a group-defense against inner phantasms. Much, if not most, of human culture-

history has been governed by what must be called an unreality, that is fantasy, principle.

"DeMause identifies the group-psychological purpose of group-fantasies: 'to act out and defend against repressed desires rages and prohibitions which have their origins in childhoods common to the group.'¹ I would add to this only that the :group-fantasy enacts not only the inner world of people who share a common group-history, but, at an even deeper level, the inner world of people who, phylo-genetically, share a common species-specific human biology whose psychically most prepotent experiences are prolonged helplessness, post-uterine symbiosis, and the universal nuclear family trinity of mother-father-child, with its fateful oedipal conflict." [p.381]

That definition now needs rewriting to include the pre- and peri-natal periods as well as the post-natal factors listed here. DeMause's breakthrough into the foetal origins of group fantasies² was an important step in synthesis taken in 1982 - 1983. This particular article is before that point in time. It is also interesting that in "Reagan's America"³ deMause and the other members of the Institute for Psycho-History appear to have withdrawn from the foetal interpretations of group fantasy.

Stein concludes: 'that man creates "reality", history in the image of his shared inner-fantasy, not the reverse, and discovers externally what he blithely externalizes, that is, projects'. If that is so then the study of the externalised projections in common myth and ritual, particularly those associated with very high aggregates of human grouping, must represent the deepest and most profoundly repressed common traumata of the shared unconscious of mankind.

"La Barre notes the dynamic indentity between culture and neurosis, if not psychosis, since the goal of both is to avoid examining those sacred premises that serve as defense-mechanisms."⁴ [p. 381]

The last two or three extracts from this article impinge very clearly on the agenda which Freud⁵ named as needing to be tackled yet still do not raise the premises on which the agenda can be tackled. Fascinatingly LaBarre goes on to say that 'all social groups are in the long run either therapeutic, that is adaptive to a real world, or anti-adaptive', whereas we now categorise groups and social systems in three ways: firstly, anti-adaptive or collusional; secondly, therapeutic or norm-restorative; and thirdly, developmental or maturational⁶.

"Tradition is as neurotic as any patient; its overgrown fear of deviation from its fortuitous standards conforms to all the usual definitions of the psychopathic"⁷ [p.382]

"Koenigsberg writes, 'Cultural ideas, beliefs and values may be viewed ... as an institutionalization and social embodiment of primal human phantasies'"⁸ [p.382]

Koenigsberg goes on to propose as a way of discovering these primal human phantasies that we should carefully comb the cultural texts themselves for primary process imagery embedded in official culture. In other words for those parapraxes that make their incursion into conscious ordinary language.

"The technique of 'Fantasy Analysis' applied to human groups has been made most explicit and comprehensive by deMause. He suggests that the investigator record all the metaphors and similes, body language, strong feeling tones, strong emotional states, all repetitive, unusual or gratuitous word usages, symbolic terms, overt group responses; note long periods of no imagery; and eliminate all negatives, subjects and objects, paying attention only to verbs."⁹ [p.383]

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As Stein approached the meeting of the faculty group he described himself as one who 'vacillated between dreading the meeting, fulminating against it as an obtrusive nuisance, and hope that we might really get some work done'. Right at the approach therefore there is an emotional ambivalence between two poles of dread and hope. Realistically one could have looked toward the group event as a time at which there would be both work done and the antithetical non-work-oriented, phantasy-dominated group process which Stein describes himself as dreading. At this point therefore Stein puts himself in the conflicted either/or position of idealisation, rather than holding the reality-oriented position of both/and. Clearly he would like a 100% work group and rejects the phantasy tasks of the group.

There is, however, here a deeper level of ambivalence. The word 'dread' in itself is bipolar. It is well defined as the desire of the feared or the fear of the desired. Perhaps the fundamental and unconscious ambivalence experienced by the author was to do with the phantasy content of the group, its defensive task. Interestingly he goes on to describe the work group as political in the sense that it is able to be task oriented and reality testing, in other words 'a good group' in his own terms of definition. This understanding of politics is then contrasted with his experience of 'political' activity in the university which was characterised by an outworking of 'the art of oedipal psychodrama' in which 'power was measured by symbolic homosexual dominance and surrender'. During the process of the group there was a major conflict between the norms being articulated and imposed by the chair and Stein's own contribution attempting to maintain the value, individuality and separateness of personal contributions. The point of outburst, or conflict, with the authority figure appears to have been unconsciously, if not more overtly, anticipated by Stein. He it was who was used within the group process to act aggressively toward the group father. The subsequent silence seems to acknowledge the symbolic death of the group leader, followed by retaliation on the one committing the murder. Stein's own individual contribution is defined as a group possession. He is therefore stripped of his ability to sustain his own individual boundary and subsumed within the group. The homosexual raper is thus taken in, his very thrust to assert his own power is accepted as part of the group collusion process. It is significant that after this dethroning and mutual rendering impotent of both the father figure and the aggressor, another younger sibling takes the position of the chair. My sense is that there were power plays in process of which Stein himself was to a large extent unconscious and which represent an acting out of that which was dreaded, in other words desired and feared, namely a confrontation with the chair. It was at this point in the process at which his otherwise objective analytical presence was most disturbed by his own material and in the wake of the outburst the immediate reactions of the group also appear to have been lost to the analysis, so representing the common or collusion core of the group process.

Stein owes much of his later analytic framework to the description of group process in the writings and work of Bion¹⁰ and the understanding of group process in oedipal terms which rests strongly on the basis of Freudian psychoanalytic assumptions. As such his material is quite consistent with the understanding of group fantasy originally outlined as re-presenting the common childhood elements of group members, essentially within the post-natal phase.

I would argue, however, that Stein's analysis is inadequate to make sense of the total content of the group process. I find as I attempt to press beyond his material that my own perceptions become first clear and then confused and I am aware of having to wrestle with collusion processes very similar to those experienced within the Tavistock Model of Bion consultancy¹¹.

Firstly, in an all-male group the pairing function inevitably raises homosexual fantasies, fears and desires and is therefore fraught with dread. A considerable amount of the material provided in the phantasy analysis makes sense when viewed as a denied pairing group, in which co-operative alliances seeking to generate something hopeful for the future are rendered suspect in the dominance/submission struggle of a homosexual pair. It is not surprising therefore that the one issue that brings hope to the group as a possible future project has to do with caring for the wounds of the injured innocent. A symbolic Messiah emerges from the repressed pairing culture to dominate group process because the underlying homosexual struggle cannot be raised articulately to consciousness and faced.

Secondly, the foundations of the Freudian theory of oedipal conflict, and the Bion understanding of group process are clearly and indeed compulsively, postnatal. In the light of the research being done into pre and peri-natal consciousness, learning and psychology over the last two decades¹², it is now possible to understand castration anxiety as a representation in the part of the primal drama of eviction from the womb, cutting off of the whole person from the placenta and the land of the known, with the severing of the umbilicus, as well as the impingement of parturition, acting as the focal points of the trauma¹³. This is the kind of material which Stein hints at in expanding deMause's definition of the group psychological purpose of group fantasies to include on an 'even deeper level the inner world of people who phylo-genetically share a common species-specific human biology, whose psychically most prepotent experiences are prolonged helplessness ...'. Unfortunately, Stein does not clearly articulate the intrauterine and perinatal areas of that prolonged helplessness. There is one small section in which he notes violent birth as a symbolisation of group fantasy, but the rest of the behaviour is seen in an extra-uterine, primitive oedipal context.

Now if the oedipal material is understood as a displacement and its symbolism is re-read so that the sexual part is replaced by the total person, and if secondly castration anxiety is also seen as a displacement of the anxiety about being cut off from the land of the living, then the group psycho-drama can be viewed in perinatal terms. Here there are struggles to define the group boundary, the skin within which the unity of the intra-boundary content has to be formed. The common life of this group foetus demands the bringing into a unity of the disparate parts which threaten to develop a life of their own. There is therefore a lowering of differentiation at the intra-group level with the major distinction being made between that which is inside and that which is outside. Leadership of the group within this context is required to maintain the boundary of the foetal existence as a defence against entering the traumatic perinatal drama.

As an example, the chairman's seat was taken by a younger member of the group, while the chairman himself took a different position. In terms of the oedipal fantasy this would be interpreted as a struggle for leadership. Within the primal interpretation, however, one could be looking at a rotation of the position of the foetal group within its boundary. Depending on the geographical layout of the group, this could be a moving of the head away from the cervix into a more regressive, earlier position, or alternatively, a movement away from the earlier position and an engagement of the group head within the phantasy cervix. Much depends on whether the group is caught up in a sustained regressive direction, whether the leader is being used as a defence against perinatal material, or whether the leader is in fact a work leader leading the group out through its position of risk into the post-natal field of work, struggle for survival, differentiation and integration.

Once the foetal origins of group phantasy are allowed, we may then ask the question, "Against what is such behaviour a defence?" I would suggest that here, as in every human group, part of the function of the group itself is to reinforce the defences against resurgence of perinatal trauma into conscious memory. In other words the shared group unconscious phantasy is that membership is still intrauterine. Something terrible could well happen at and beyond the boundary, whether physically in terms of the in/out boundary, or in terms of the past/present/future boundary of time. When those two phantasies coincide then the anticipation or paranoid phantasy reifies around the myth that something violent, evil and potentially life threatening exists outside the group though shortly to be encountered. The group's action in the here and now is a preparation to deal with this imminent catastrophe.

I would suggest that this interpretation of the group dynamic as a displacement of a 'future birth' allows a more coherent synthesis of the symbols and phantasies of the group than the more limited post-natal oedipal field used by Stein. If this primal analysis of the group process is accurate then one would expect certain concomitant elements of material within Stein's own presentation which contain signals or flags of the unresolved, unconscious content.

The comment which Stein makes about normal participation in groups, namely

"It is the conscious message and task which we permit ourselves to hear ... and later to remember. In the process we edit out an enormous amount of unconscious material - to which we have contributed"

inevitably applies to the material of which Stein is himself unconscious within the group and which he is therefore unable to permit himself to hear. The common core unresolved defences to which he also contributes within the group render that inner nucleus of the most deeply traumatic, most commonly shared and therefore most deeply and commonly repressed heartland of the group's unconscious still collusionally dark.

There is a paragraph at the beginning of the phantasy analysis of the group process in which Stein offers 'a number of explanatory remarks'. The purpose apparently is to help the reader to understand what is about to come. However the phantasy analysis of Stein's own explanation is most revealing. Stein expects the reader to be 'startled', 'thoroughly repelled', the material is 'crowded with polymorphous perverse imagery', 'overwhelming', 'emotions frightening', a 'Niagara Falls-like inundation'. Stein notes that this material re-presents his

own experience within the group and offers it to the reader as a form of 'reassurance'. Apparently the reader's anxieties are to be sedated at the outset by Stein's projective identification that the reader is bound to experience the same kind of thing that he did. However if we read that in reverse, as an existential testimony to the quality of emotional experience that Stein himself had within the group, then we hear him going through a sequence of being startled, thoroughly repelled, crowded, shattered in the sense of being unable to give any synthesis or order to the 'polymorphous' material, repelled by its perversity, overwhelmed by its content, terrified by the emotional levels and finally overwhelmed by the tsunami, the great wave, the water-fall, the inundation, that felt like being at the bottom of the Niagara Falls. That sequence itself can be understood as a primal trace.

He goes on to articulate the collusion stance necessary for empathy but which at another level blocks analytic insight. He requires that 'acceptance of the dream-like quality of the group is essential if one is to begin to fathom what it' felt like to be a member'. So the readers are asked to 'enter courageously into the group-psychotic reality' in the same way that Stein himself ventured to commit himself, albeit with a certain distancing from the group process. The word 'fathom' stands out clearly. There is a sense of depth beneath the surface of the water. The dream-like quality is one of being submerged, as if the group life exists in some kind of phantasy corporate amnion facing the overwhelming experience of the breaking of the waters which threaten to cascade in some devastating fall, a caesura between the still waters above, and the pools below. It is an inundation which overwhelms the consciousness of the participant. So I suggest it is the symbolism of the primal boundary, the fall, which is most deeply repressed within Stein's level of phantasy analysis.

The third paragraph on page 386 describes the phantasy process of the group as 'this unwelcome wealth of nightmarish material'. Again, note the ambivalence. It is rich, but it is unwelcome. It is wealth because it is the raw material of understanding, but it is offensive. It has the quality of nightmare, and yet it is not to be welcomed as the high road to the corporate unconscious. Stein has no need to use this kind of evaluative and emotive material at this point of the introduction of his analysis. Again I am bound to conclude that some of the material which emerged within the group process was itself nightmarishly unwelcome in that it raised for Stein himself elements of psychotic terror, anxiety, rage, and regression which were previously denied and therefore experienced as extremely disturbing.

The task of the faculty group eventually gelled around the field of 'disaster medicine associated with the eventuality of the United States going to war'. Perhaps it was the sense that beyond the boundaries of that present group experience there would be disaster. The repressed, hurt, parts of the group, projected out beyond its present boundary into the future would require certain care and medication, for which they should obviously be preparing. If we persist in following through deMause's analysis of war as re-enactment of primal trauma¹⁴, then presumably caring for the casualties of war represents the intrauterine awareness of the need for nursing and care for the traumatically impinged and hurt neonatal self. This would reinforce my interpretation that the group saw itself in phantasy as sustainedly intrauterine, though living in dread of parturition. In other words, it was held in ambivalence precisely between the emotions of fear and desire around its point of birth. Significantly on p. 387 Stein describes the two-day event as 'the two-day birth of the Department of Community Health'. At that level he was aware that he was going through a corporate perinatal process, but it does not show in the phantasy analysis.

By late in the two-day process with the group's boundaries clearly defined, its internal unity assured and its future task in terms of dealing with anxieties about the catastrophe to come, displaced and reified into the programme of disaster medicine, it is hardly surprising that the group became trapped around the dining table for two and a quarter hours. The fixated intrauterine, regressive, dependent, placentally nurtured, foetal group is formed as a defence against the engagement of its working boundary with the future. Here we perceive, not I think as deMause would have us believe, the foetal origins of group behaviour, but the foetal characteristics of group behaviour. The origin of the behaviour lies in the corporate defensive regression from the perceived common perinatal impingement. I would therefore posit that deMause's diagnosis of social process as having foetal characteristics is brilliantly descriptive but that his attribution of foetal behaviour as causal to historic process is a displacement. The foetal characteristics of corporate behaviour are themselves caused by the fundamental defensive reactions set up in common response to the shared multi-individual perinatal drama with its normally traumatic levels of malnutrition, impingement, separation and loss.

Another point that must be made concerns the parallel congruence of small group and national group phantasy at the same time. Stein discusses in detail whether the national group is made up of the confluence of small group and individual projection or whether the small groups are mirroring the context of the national group. I would suggest that there is another level at which the analysis could be taken. The national group itself and every element of it exists within an ecological and global context in which we are encountering limits to growth. There is a sense in which homo sapiens as a mega-foetus is encountering the conditions of full-term within the womb of Mother Earth. There is, however, no possibility of birth. Within this global context, the myths of apocalyptic imagery, imminent catastrophe and global trauma predominate. They resonate with common primal phantasy and trigger the concomitant breakdown of the normal cultural defences against primal psychotic terror and resurgence. These factors taken together intensify the primal imagery at every level of the human group process from individual to global village.

In his later discussion of the material Stein notes that,

The group regresses to the mother-child unity of primary narcissism. Each member enlists himself in the defense of the symbiotic tie to eliminate any badness from within the group and to fight any threat of violation from without. Like the "nation", the group is a projection of infantile primary narcissism".

It is vital to allow the 'mother-child unity' to be understood not simply in terms of the nursing symbiosis or of the later oedipal bond between son and mother but also primarily and at a much deeper level, of the intra/extra bond of the foetus within womb. Each and every member of the group treats the group itself as if it were the womb of the mother. The wider institution within its social environment then becomes the body of the Great Mother, within which the little group struggles to remain unborn. The intrauterine space is idealised in the sense that it must be the perfectly good environment with a perfectly good foetal content. Badness is projected elsewhere and is dealt with in some placental interchange with the environment so that the environment holds the waste products of the intra while the intra feeds on the resources of the environment.

I would suggest that the sense of satisfaction attained at the end of the two-day retreat stemmed from the completion of the phantasy task of the group. Norms of sustained intrauterine defence were established with idealisation, denial, projection and regression, so maintaining repression of the common shared pre- and peri-natal trauma of the group-members. These defences were in fundamental collusion with the social environment, within which this same phantasy psycho-drama constitutes the core social process of homo sapiens.

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