



A facilitator's reflections

Na de vorige twee verslagen te hebben gelezen, schreef Leszcz zelf een reflectie. De redactie heeft ervoor gekozen deze onvertaald te plaatsen.

Door Melyn Leszcz

I am very appreciative of the opportunity to comment about my experience of the demonstration group that I was privileged to lead at this conference. It was very helpful to read the reflections of one of the participants (IS) and two of the observers (FvH & AtH). Their reflections spurred my own thinking.

I have led more than fifty such groups in different settings across North America, Europe, Israel and China and always experience a certain apprehension about how it will go. I find it important to approach the group with the posture of combined humility and assertiveness, trying to find the right space and pace for my participation. I also am mindful that the demonstration group and the context of being an invited presenter can generate transference and countertransference dynamics related to both idealization and devaluation.

I pay very careful attention to the role of culture. Even within the same country, different organizations and different professional communities have different cultural expectations around authority, transparency, intimacy and emotional expression. This of course is even more salient when we work cross culturally. This also alerts me to dynamics that may be a reflection of the social unconscious or larger and more universal sources of concern, apprehension or desire.

The demonstration group is a unique,

impactful training intervention for group psychotherapists. Along with didactic, experiential and supervision components, observation is a key part of how we train. It also serves an important purpose for the leader insofar as it is a cornerstone of deliberate practice. We learn by exposing ourselves to feedback and input from others. No one grows in their capacity or competence without exposure to feedback and to criticism. I invariably learn something about myself and my craft through doing the demonstration group.

My aim always is to create a learning opportunity that illustrates what I have presented. In Utrecht, the focus was on the evidence-based group therapist: the role of cohesion, empathy and working within the here and now in the context of the interpersonal model. I also try to make use of the limitations of time and the confrontation with existential limits as a stimulus to leverage the brevity of the group. Throughout, I also keep in mind the value of process illumination. It is a touchstone for me, reminding me to shift between narrative and emotional experience to the attribution of meaning to that experience through processing of the group experience.

Boundaries

With these principles in mind, let me share more of what I experienced in this particular group. First, I felt gratitude that seven willing participants came forward. That is the starting point and the next task is to foster some sense of burgeoning cohesion. I aim to do that by using a pre-group introduction and orientation, and throughout the group by trying to build a sense of safety

and connection. This was an unusual situation because the members of this group knew each other well. They were a pre-existing intervention group and although two core members were absent this day, I felt like

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I was jumping into a group that had a prior life and history of its own, and would have a future life of its own. Furthermore, the members were accustomed to the leadership of a colleague whom they clearly value and respect and who came into this group as a member. I acknowledged this as a courageous and difficult step for him to take and I was mindful of the potential for competition or rivalrous tension between us. That did not emerge.

Within the framework of cohesion, I held in mind the concept of this group being a functional subgroup of the larger group around us, notably the conference participants and the demo group observers. Negotiating the boundary between the demonstration group and the larger group was critical in promoting a sense of safety and group integrity. I worked to direct members' attention to the center of our own group and in so doing, it led to a productive exploration of people's responsibility in a range of different roles. Were people

responsible for the experience of the observers? For the experience of one another in the group? For me as a guest facilitator? For others that they cared for and loved outside? And what was the impact of their responsibility to themselves?

I emphasized also at the outset principles of respect and confidentiality within and around the group as a way of securing that boundary and trying to make it safer for participants. Part of my executive function also involved developing a good collaboration with the AV technician; good audio is critically important to the success of the demonstration group because it engages the outer group without encouraging them to be intrusive or withdraw in frustration due to not being able to hear. The final important boundary that needed to be managed was time and I used the pressure of time as a way to incentivize people to take risks and to dive in. We addressed the interface between boundaries and responsibility because ultimately boundaries remind us of our limits both with regards to our capacities and our obligations.

Responsibility

Working within the group I was eager to make contact with each member of the group and felt the pressure to do so within a limited time. I do believe that we can do meaningful work even in just a brief moment. When I would encourage interaction, feedback or deepening exploration I would try to establish the participants' agreement with that. Were they willing to go deeper; was I pushing too much? That kind of contracting through the session is a way to strengthen the

alliance and achieve greater agreement about the goals and tasks of the demonstration group. It also fosters a relationship that feels safe and respectful. It felt very resonant to discuss responsibility and it seemed to create an empathic connection with members of the group. It also encouraged people to move beyond the protective persona of the therapist or teacher or colleague, and to be present in this group for these 75 minutes more fully for themselves. Responsibility and boundaries also led us into a discussion of the isolation of our work and the limits that we must confront in order to carry on our work professionally, always elevating the needs of our clients above our own. There is a certain inexorable deprivation that comes with our work and the best offset is to be part of a community of professional practice and to be supported by trusted colleagues.

I carry in the back of my mind always the value of professional support for one another, as a way to reduce the risk of burnout. I felt heartened that we were able to touch on that theme in this meeting. Capitalizing on our brevity I think generated greater engagement and it was interesting to me to read that theme clearly in the reflections of others. The question 'how do you want to use this unique but brief opportunity?' seemed to have a mobilizing effect, so much so that we worked until the last minute. There was a major self-disclosure about loss and isolation made at the very close of the meeting. I reinforced this as a choice made to be better connected before we ended, which I saw as a strong endorsement of our group's work.

Grateful

In leading demonstration groups, I believe it is essential to prioritize the group and its members. Other considerations are always secondary. Keeping this in mind focuses my attention on each of the members of the group and makes me less concerned about whether this is going to be a good educational experience for the observers or what the observers are going to be thinking about me. Demonstration group leaders must manage their own narcissism and self-esteem so that they can stay present and connected to the group they are leading without becoming presumptuous, high-handed or alternately shrinking away from their task.

I completed the meeting feeling grateful to the participants for their openness. I continue to be impressed with how meaningful a brief encounter can be and take from that encouragement to utilize every moment constructively both professionally and personally.