Article

Empty Spaces in Group-Analytic Psychotherapy Groups

Kenneth Bledin

Empty spaces resulting from lateness or absence are not uncommon in groups. The meaning of empty spaces needs to be analyzed not only in and by the groups but also with reference to possible theoretical explanations. They may be understood as manifestations of the anti-group and by referring to notions of subjective emptiness described, for example, by Fairbairn, Kernberg, and Balint. Feeling 'fuller' may be experienced as threatening to individuals who are 'empty of themselves'. However, the transitional space potentially provided by a psychotherapeutic group can provide a shared space in which the capacity to relate and feel emotionally nourished may develop. This paper analyzes how a developmental process in empty space groups may be apparent in those sessions in which the group is complete and why it is that the therapist should not collude with the group's avoidance of its members' capacity for fullness.

Key words: absence, empty space, empty-of-oneself, transitional space, completeness

There can be few groups in which empty spaces have not, at least occasionally, been a feature and few group analysts who have not been obliged at some time to consider the meaning of empty spaces in their groups. Foulkes commented little about absences and non-attendances in his groups. In his first book (Foulkes, 1948) he included only three paragraphs on this topic under the headings 'The presence of the absent member' and 'Another absent member as scapegoat' (Foulkes, 1948: 128–131). He referred here to the way that group members maintain their presence in the group matrix even when they are not physically present in the group and

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to how the projections of other group members might be directed at them specifically because of their absences.

In his later work (Foulkes, 1975), he expressed the expectation that patients should not be absent from groups, but should be 'regular' and 'punctual'. Regularity, he said, allows inter-communication and continuity to be maintained. Late-coming indicates either 'temporary resistance' or 'a character feature . . . a chronic behavioural disturbance, a deep-seated neurotic need . . .' (Foulkes, 1975: 88). He went on to explain *what happens* when patients are missing from a group, but made little attempt to explore the *meaning* of those absences in terms of group analytic processes. A case example, however, illustrated the significance of a patient's absence from one of his groups (Foulkes, 1975: 135–136).

Foulkes asserted that 'In a well-conducted group which is regular it rarely happens that more than one or two persons are absent in any particular one session' (Foulkes, 1975: 85). By contrast, Brewer (1998) and Zelaskowski (1998) reported on their 'nuclear' and 'suboptimal' groups, in which total numbers remained low and attendance remained poor. Brewer (1998) suggested that his 'nuclear groups' mirrored both the way extended families have broken down into nuclear families and the way that nuclear families have themselves broken down in our Western social world. Zelaskowski located the disturbance not only in 'the incomplete family' (1998: 496) but also, initially, in what he perceived to be his own suboptimal therapeutic skills and then in the suboptimal environment in which he was trying to work. This explanation perhaps referred in part to the absence of the safe and containing external group space which enables group members to explore the internal space of their unconscious lives (Walshe, 1995).

My experiences of running groups in UK Health Service settings have led me to wonder about the meaning of empty spaces in groups, which, in other respects, appear to be functioning well, unlike those described by Brewer and Zelaskowski. One such group, for example, continued successfully for more than two years. The group started with six members and two more joined five months later, in Session 20. Two patients dropped out – one after the first session, the other after one year. Both were replaced, the first after five months, the second after three.

I present these details to demonstrate that this group was essentially stable in its membership over the course of its life. Nevertheless, the average attendance for the core members was at

only 70% of their weekly sessions. For four of the six core members the attendance ranged between 54% and 70% of sessions. In other words, these four group members, although apparently committed to the group and to their analysis, nevertheless attended little more than between one in two or two in three sessions of the group. They were not overtly ambivalent about either their membership of the group or its value and significance to them. They expressed a commitment to the group and frequently reported and reiterated the benefits they derived – benefits which were reflected in positive changes in their active participation in the group sessions which they attended and in their lives outside the group. But the group was complete in only seven percent of the total number of sessions.

How was I to understand the meaning of the absences, which at times I felt must be prearranged, with group members taking turns to be away? In some weeks, last minute telephone calls would notify me of the impending absence; at other times an empty chair would be the only communication from the patient.

I tried to think about the empty spaces in the group – the planned and unplanned absences, the late arrivals and early departures – as manifestations of the anti-group (Nitsun, 1996). But then, how to explain the presence of the anti-group, which sat in the empty spaces in 93 out of 100 sessions or entered the group room five, 10, 30 minutes late? I attempted to encourage the group to analyze the absences and empty spaces within the sessions, while also trying to understand the meaning of the empty spaces by referring to theory. Did the persisting empty spaces in the external group space in some way reflect an intra-psychic emptiness in the members of the group?

The Experience of Emptiness

Fairbairn (1952) argued that in circumstances of emotional deprivation in the early oral stage, the infant who feels 'empty' (i.e. when hungry) also feels that s/he has emptied the mother, since deprivation adds aggression to an already more intense oral need (Fairbairn, 1952).

The notion of 'emptiness' often recurs as a theme in groups. It may be presented as a sense of emptiness and futility in life, chronic boredom, loneliness or a sense of invisibility in company. Compulsive eating or episodes of bingeing may be explained in terms of 'emotional emptiness'. Alcohol may be used to obliterate the

emotional emptiness of the external and internal worlds. Others report a deadening sense of unreality or a blunting and blurring of any deep personal experience. Kernberg (1975) described each of these behaviours as reactions to the subjective experience of emptiness.

Kernberg (1975) argued that a subjective sense of emptiness, manifested in symptoms such as these, results from an internal abandonment of the self by internal objects or a loss of the internal objects. This seems to equate with Freud's description of the development of melancholia (Freud, 1917): the internal emptiness suggests an object loss of some kind which is not consciously perceived. The loss results not only in a *world* which has become poor and empty, as in mourning. Rather, 'in melancholia it is *the ego itself*' which is poor and empty' (Freud, 1917: 246; my italics).

Edna Balint (1993) presented clinical material in her consideration of the experience of 'being empty of oneself'. In her account, feeling empty of oneself is the opposite of feeling 'full of oneself', when the person 'is identified with himself' (Balint, 1993: 39). In people who are 'empty of themselves', there is a 'disturbance in the relationship both to the self and to the environment' (Balint, 1993: 40) and either the ego or the self feels the other to be dystonic. People who are empty of themselves find it difficult to be left alone and to do things for themselves, but they do not necessarily feel helped or their emptiness 'filled' simply by the presence of another.

The Threat of Completeness

The 'threat of completeness' seems to characterize groups in which empty spaces have become common through unexpected absences or persistent late arrivals. Why do group members retreat from the experience of greater fullness that a complete group might offer?

As Balint's (1993) therapy progressed with a young woman who was 'empty of herself', the patient withdrew and regressed as a way of avoiding the recurring sense of emptiness produced by the therapist not understanding fully the self which had begun to develop within her empty space. Envious attacks on her objects ensued.

In the same way, the members of an 'empty space group' might

be seen as attacking their objects (other group members, the group conductor, the group-as-a-whole) by staying away at the very time that their internal emptiness is beginning to feel fed or filled. It may be more important than we sometimes realize to remember to acknowledge sufficiently in our comments and interpretations how difficult it is for group members, empty of themselves as they sometimes are, to have a safer experience of being more 'complete'. As Balint wrote of her patient: 'The void in fact was caused by my presence when I did not understand her . . .' (Balint, 1993: 46). Given the individual defences of our patients, and perhaps also our own defences, it may not be too surprising that a collective group defence of absence, of moving away from attachment and attuned communication, is deployed in order to recreate earlier discontinuous relationships.

Patients who enter a group with a persistent and pervasive experience of 'emotional emptiness' may feel themselves 'fed' by a therapeutic group which provides them with the nourishment that they have not previously enjoyed. However, in the process of *taking* this nourishment, the group members, with their backgrounds of emotional deprivation, may feel unable to *give*, as if they have emptied the nurturing breast provided by the maternal group (cf. Fairbairn, 1952). They might then experience anxiety (Fairbairn, 1952) or guilt (Kernberg, 1975) that they might destroy the group mother, the group matrix (cf. Roberts, 1993) because they have sucked it dry. They would therefore need to absent themselves at intervals to allow their anxiety to diminish, and/or to allow the group mother to be replenished.

Then, after this period of recuperation, the absent member returns to his or her empty space and says to the group (following Winnicott, 1974: 105) 'I destroyed you', and the group is there to receive the communication. Moreover, the space in the group is there, empty, but waiting to be filled, carrying the potential to be filled. To paraphrase Winnicott again (1974: 105): The group member now says '"Hullo group!" "I destroyed you." "I love you." "You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you."' And the group member can say to himself or herself: 'I gave the group an opportunity to destroy me, but the group has kept my space for me. I can fill my external empty space and the group can fill my empty internal space'. Or, returning to Winnicott (1974: 106), 'In other words, because of the survival of the object . . .' (in

this case, the group, a microcosm of the social world), '. . . the subject may now have started to live a life in the world of objects' (that is, to relate more fully to others in the real social world).

The group members' empty spaces are not only experienced in relation to themselves or the group-as-a-whole but also, in the transference, to the group conductor.

> . . . he must be in a position to give the group the security and immunity emanating from his authority as a leader as long as the group is in need of them [and] . . . to be able to liquidate it later on. (Foulkes, 1964: 61)

This quotation may be seen to summarize the process whereby the group learns to fill its own empty spaces, rather than expecting the 'leader' or authority figure to fill them or to instruct the group in how to do so. By effecting what Foulkes called the 'second basic experience' (Foulkes, 1964: 60), i.e. by modifying their relationship to the leader on the primary or latent level, the group becomes enabled to begin to resolve the 'first basic problem' (Foulkes, 1964: 56), the manifest relationships between people in the adult social world. Then the empty spaces begin to be filled by meaningful relationships with others – first in the group and then, ideally, in the outside world.

Garwood (2001) cited research which indicated that until the infant has memorized and internalized the experience of having a mother, no sense of psychic separateness can be developed. When the sense of separateness *has* developed, the infant begins to experience a sense of space and boundary between self and maternal object. Members of an 'empty spaces group' might need similarly to memorize and internalize the experience of the group in order to develop a healthier separation from it. Only then will they be able to tolerate a sense of completeness in their outer – and thus also in their inner – space. They need to feel a *oneness with the group mother* in order to experience a healthy sense of *separateness from the group mother* – without experiencing that separateness as destructive either of their self or of the group mother. The space they then experience is no longer so powerfully an internal sense of emptiness, the absence of an internalized maternal object. It is now a space between self and maternal object (the group) which can continue to offer comfort, nourishment and support.

Transitional Space and Potential Space

My argument thus far has been concerned with the empty spaces that reflect something missing, something lacking in the lives of group members. However, empty spaces also offer potential – the potential to be filled creatively.

Edwards (2000) referred to Milner's concept of illusory space, which lies at the interface of internally conceived reality and externally perceived reality. In this illusory space, Milner proposed, creativity and inner freedom are born and develop.

The development of relationships in the group allows group members opportunities to move from the isolation of the intra-individual empty space towards a shared inter-individual group space. While Winnicott's (1967) 'potential space' is located at the meeting point of the *inner psychic world* and the *outer world* of *objective reality*, the group's potential space exists *objectively* only *in the group* but *subjectively* also *in the outside world*. It is therefore both real and illusory. It may be compared with a 'transitional space', which is 'neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality' (Winnicott, 1974: 110). 'It is neither fully 'me' nor 'not-me'. It is both 'created' and 'real' (Schlachet, 1986: 35). Each group member's transitional space can overlap with that of others to provide a shared space in which words, play and experience begin to be shared and in which the capacity to relate may develop. However, if the 'not-me' world threatens to intrude too deeply into the individual's transitional space, then that person may need to withdraw from the potential space of the group, leaving an empty space in the external reality to mark their absence.

In the Absence of Empty Spaces: Development in 'Empty Space Groups'

How should we evaluate development of an 'empty space group'? Most simply, groups have beginning, middle and termination stages (Foulkes and Anthony, 1965), but numerous attempts have been made to try to define the development of the group. Factors such as changing membership, breaks or absences can affect the pace and sequencing of a group's developmental process (Agmon and Schneider, 1998). These authors suggested that the gaps between expectations and what actually happens in the group contribute to the group's movement through its phases of development.

'Empty space groups' may be able to develop by regressing:

through their absences and lateness, group members act out their rage and fear of the space between their expectations and their realities. The group gives them the space to explore space and perhaps, while there, to begin to make new discoveries.

In my experience of 'empty space groups', I have noted the following developmental process in and around sessions in which there were *no* empty spaces. These features may well be familiar to group analysts, but they take on a particular salience when they appear to predominate in those sessions in which the whole group is present.

- *Angry backing away from closeness and intimacy*: The whole group resonates with attacks on individual members and on the group-as-a-whole. The therapist, too, feels under attack, and fantasies or anxieties about individual and group survival abound.
- *Negotiating for space in relationships*: Group members circle one another, testing out mirroring responses, reflecting one another's concerns without acknowledging consciously the connections between them or the common spaces which they share.
- *Intrusions into personal and group space*: Group members interrupt one another or abruptly change the topic or direction of the discussion. Once again there might be hostile attacks on one group member who is scapegoated as the one 'responsible' for the group's completeness, and efforts made to extrude him or her from the group space.
- *Empty internal space*: The group is concerned with how it will be fed or how it will tolerate hunger. This includes jostling for space in the group, as members compete to take up as much space as one another – both in the external space, as they deny or avoid the others' concerns or symptoms, while magnifying their own and in the group's intra-psychic space, lest they be overlooked in the group's fullness.
- *Communications around commitment and trust*: As the group develops and matures, it begins to address issues of commitment, trust and intimacy, within the group and in members' outside lives.
- *Dependency on the group and internalization of the group*: The group begins to talk about the value and importance of the group to the members. They resonate to themes of relationships

both in the group and in the outside world. These thoughts reflect developing relationships in the group and the expressed or unconscious sadness that the commitment and intimacy experienced in the group must one day come to an end. Group members might relate experiences in which they relied on or expect to rely on the internalized group to help them to cope.

- *Gains made in the shared group space*: As group members prepare to leave the group, or, as the date of a prearranged closure approaches, they begin to talk about how the group has helped them and how much they have valued the group space and the relationships within it. They may comment openly on the intimacy they have shared and on their success at communicating with one another. These experiences of intimacy and shared communication are often new to patients of 'empty spaces groups' who have felt 'empty of themselves'. The analyst may notice a more direct communication of the symptoms which had previously been 'autistic, mumbling to themselves secretly' (Foulkes and Anthony, 1965: 259).

Conclusion: Some Space for Reflection

There may be a variety of reasons for group members to be absent from or repeatedly late for groups. Foulkes (1975: 88), for example, referred to 'sporadic latecoming' as an 'expression of temporary resistance'. I have not attempted, in the present article, to explore or explain *individual* 'acting out' (Foulkes and Anthony, 1965) of this kind. Rather, I have described 'empty space *groups*' in which the anti-group takes the form of silent, passive attacks on the group's integrity.

What factors enable some 'empty space groups' to survive and thrive while others become 'suboptimal' (Zelaskowski, 1998). Harris (1998) pointed out that the personal/historical stage of development of the group and the conductor's psychotherapeutic experience are important factors in holding, containing and modifying group members' psychic evacuations. Or, as Nitsun (1989, citing Winnicott, 1960) has argued, the paranoid-schizoid type of anxiety generated in the early stages of group development requires 'good enough' holding to be adequately contained. The infant group, filled only with its own nihilistic emptiness, needs to be provided with an adequate 'inner containing space [which] is . . . a

primary determinant of the group's capacity to thrive' (Harris, 1998: 486).

I have found that naming the absences seems to offer that containment by giving the group the message that it will survive the attacks and that it can be full despite the absences. In my groups, I have persisted in bringing the absentees into the empty spaces they have left in the group, referring to them and their absence and reminding the group on each occasion that I would write or had written to those who had missed two or three consecutive sessions. This is, of course, but one approach. There are, no doubt, many others; Nitsun (1996), for example, has offered more elaborate approaches to working creatively with anti-group phenomena.

For the group to work with its empty spaces, its members need to be enabled to emerge from their own empty spaces. The therapist must avoid colluding with a group in denying that the group-as-a-whole might benefit from the continued and continuing presence of members who may be 'empty of themselves'. The empty spaces in which these individuals conduct their isolated lives should not be allowed to become too threatening a reminder of our own empty spaces, the empty spaces we may all prefer to avoid.

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