This paper argues that productive and co-operative thinking best happens in the context of spatial, rather than linear relations. The latter is characterized by illusions of merger and polarity, the former by a capacity to tolerate similarity and difference. This capacity is manifested in the activity of ‘bearing witness’; an activity vital to the mature psychological development of the individual and the development and maintenance of a just society. The author seeks to develop Foulkes’s ‘model of three’ with insights gained from contemporary group-analytic and post-Kleinian thinking. The paper concludes that the witness, in bearing and being the bearer of difference, is key in the development of a mature, thinking group.

Key words: witnessing, model of three, Oedipal situation, mirroring, difference

The proposition is that looking and being looked at is a fundamental process in personality development, in finding out who one is and who one is not. (Pines [1982] 1998a: 34)
something about oneself – one’s behaviour, for example, or one’s feelings towards oneself or others. Indeed the capacity to witness is essential to the psychologically mature activity of self-reflection, of objective self-consciousness.

The social and psychological implications of witnessing (self and others) is usefully encapsulated in the notion of a triangle:

**FIGURE 1**

On an intra-psychic level, A and B are internal objects and the line between them, their linear relational transaction. C, though capable of a linear relationship with A or B individually, is also the observing ego witnessing the transaction between A and B, the source of experience. On an interpersonal or inter-group level, A and B are, respectively, individuals or social groupings, again engaged in a linear relational transaction, this time witnessed by an external third (C), another individual or social grouping. In all instances – intra-psychic, interpersonal and inter-group – C may be engaged in a linear relationship with either A or B. Yet C’s relationship to A and B’s relationship, by dint of the fact that C is ‘excluded’ and therefore a ‘witness’ rather than a direct participant, is spatial rather than linear. It is the spatial relationship, I suggest, that promises the potential for perspective by proffering room for reflection.

*The witness in Foulkes’s ‘model of three’*

For Foulkes (1948), the witnessing process – ‘observation and self-observation in a social setting’ – is a crucial therapeutic group activity, facilitating the revision of both ego and superego boundaries. He first refers to the witness/‘observer’s’ contribution in his ‘model of three’:
if A and B are two persons between whom this interaction takes place, it would appear to me that the presence of a third person C is required if this interrelationship is to be seen in perspective. . . . This . . . model of three, is . . . the simplest elementary model for the understanding of interpersonal relationships. C represents that new third dimension group observation introduces. (Foulkes, 1964: 49)

Although Foulkes makes few explicit references to this ‘model’, its essence is clearly implicit in the concept of ‘mirroring’. Here the developmental impact of bearing witness – witnessing and being witnessed – becomes more apparent:

*Mirror reactions* are characteristically brought out when a number of persons meet and interact. A person sees himself, or part of himself – often a repressed part of himself – reflected in the interactions of other group members. . . . He also gets to know himself – and this is a fundamental process in ego development – by the effect he has on others and the picture they form of him. (Foulkes, 1964: 110)

This view, as Pines ([1985] 1998a) points out, is in line with many theoretical formulations about, and observations of, the developmental import of mother-infant relations.

One reason Foulkes gives for developing beyond a ‘model of three’ is his interest in the matrix, ‘inside which all other relationships develop’ (1964: 49). Another may be that the model has clear Oedipal resonances that tend to tie it to an individualistic model of mind: the model of mind from which he sought to break free.

Views of the Oedipus complex (or Oedipal situation) have moved on apace since Foulkes (Britton et al., 1989). Indeed, Foulkes himself revisited the complex, from a psycho-social perspective, in later papers (E. Foulkes 1990; see also Brown and Zinkin, 1994a); and Pines ([1987], [1989], [1998b] 1998a) too makes frequent reference to the broader familial and social dimensions of the Oedipus myth. Thus Foulkes’s ‘model of three’ seems worth revisiting, for, as Schlapobersky (1994) comments:

Between the dyadic experience of a pair and the group experience of three there is a transition just as radical and profound as that between one and two. Whatever the size of a small therapy group, the model of three gives it its underlying emotional structure (1994: 226)
The witness in the individual

Oedipus revisited
In the Tower of Babel story, people ‘get it together’ and are punished for doing so. This could be read as a warning against omnipotence (Barwick, 2003). The all-knowing Father, firmly but wisely, puts his children in their place. Alternatively, it could be the act of a ‘jealous (indeed envious) God’, one who, unable to bear witness to the ‘actions, reactions and interactions’ (Foulkes, 1964: 82) from which he is excluded – in group terms, unable to bear the ‘barometric event’ (Bennis and Shepard, 1956) – divides the over-excit able aspirants and, by dint of ruined tower, cuts them down to an appropriately diminutive size.

It is often difficult to assess whether the actions and/or words of a ‘third’, which have the effect of frustrating our possession of the good object, are prompted by destructive envy or good intent. Indeed, even when we do trust the good intent, the resulting frustration may be so great, the blow so wounding, we may find we cannot bear it, or them.

Segal (1989) suggests that it is the frustration at the breast that causes the infant to split off bad aspects and with them create a prototype third – the ‘bad breast’. This third grows in complexity as the containers available for such projections become more plentiful. An adequate experience of containment helps modify such splitting and projection (Bion, 1959); an inadequate experience does not. In this case, the ‘third’, whatever the guise, is ever more likely to be perceived as threat. Unable to bear the frustration with which its presence is associated, we continually seek to ban it from our company. Such exiles, bearing both real and projected grudges, are perfect vehicles for both phantasized and real retribution.

Freud ([1917] 1991) links sanity to the capacity to give up the idea of permanent possession of the loved object. Klein develops this notion ([1935], [1940] 1988) noting that, from the moment of weaning, we are called upon to relinquish possession of aspects of the external world, over which we have limited or no control. Out of such painful relinquishment, we may, if our envy is not too great, learn to install what is lost in the external world, in our internal, psychic one.

The Oedipus situation is inextricably bound up in the issue of loss since, when our desired, dreamt-of object is absent (and thus lost to us), there is an important sense in which it may be understood to be
elsewhere – that is, with a third. This is never easy to acknowledge and, at some level, is experienced as a profound blow to our narcissism. Yet, if we are to mature – to develop our relationship with the world, both inner and outer – we must be willing to witness and able to tolerate the loved object’s possession by another. Indeed, we must – if we are to take pleasure in, and have hope for, our own acts of internal and external coupling – be able to introject the very coupling which we witness, as a good object.

It is to the potentially creative aspects of early Oedipal negotiations that Britton (1989) draws attention:

The primal family triangle provides the child with two links connecting him separately with each parent and confronts him with the link between them which excludes him. . . . If the link between the parents perceived in love and hate can be tolerated in the child’s mind, it provides him with a prototype for an object relationship of a third kind in which he is a witness (my italics) and not a participant. A third position then comes into existence from which object relationships can be observed. Given this, we can also envisage being observed (italics in the original). This provides us with a capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own, for reflecting on ourselves whilst being ourselves. (1989: 87)

Thus the healthy negotiation of the early Oedipal situation is an inductive training in the capacity to evaluate objectively: to witness, to be witnessed and to reflect on the knowledge proffered by such witnessing. Through this process, ‘beliefs’ (Britton, 1998: 12–14) – for example, the belief of total possession of the good object – are challenged by the knowledge borne by witnessing: e.g. that the good object is sometimes ‘possessed’ by another. It is the consequent relinquishment of belief, or rather its radical modification by knowledge, that marks the shift from primitive linear to mature spatial relations.

Implicit in the act of witnessing, then, is the question: ‘Will our love survive knowledge?’ (Britton, [1985] 1992: 45). If our trust is greater than our doubt, we may look towards the shared social world to which we may contribute and from which we may take succour. If our doubts are greater than our faith, we are likely to take refuge in the ‘cultivation of illusions’: a retreat into the neuroses of isolation and individualism, predicated as they are on Oedipal illusions of quasi-merger.
The witness in the group

I have many times asked myself whether there can be more potent advocates of peace upon earth through the years to come than this massed multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war. (King George V of Great Britain and the Dominions, 1922)

Witness credibility

The activity of bearing witness is the means by which we, as individuals and as a society, struggle to capture the truth about something and, in so doing, learn a little more about ourselves, each other and the world. It is, in fact, the web of witnessing that we weave – a web indivisibly social and individual – that allows us to claim better hold on reality, and ensure that what is held, internally and externally, is well used.

Yet the witness must not only witness, but speak. If the silent witness cannot be encouraged to speak in a group, the therapist must. It is only the process of an ever-evolving dialogue between witnesses that transforms what otherwise might be stoic resignation in the face of further ‘desolation’, into the promise of real change.

The number of witnesses we are inclined to call in order to ascertain the verity of any given ‘happening’ testifies as much to our wariness as to our veneration of the impartiality the witness bears. In a court of law, indeed, even those who witness the witnesses (the jury) are open to scrutiny. This ambivalence finds good precedent:

At the mouth of two witnesses, or three witnesses shall he that is worthy of death be put to death; but at the mouth of one witness he shall not be put to death. (Deuteronomy 17: 6)

In the Book of Deuteronomy, several other injunctions are also invoked to ensure witnesses are kosher and judgement is true. Thus false witnesses, including those who keep back part of the truth, are condemned to the same punishment to which they would subject their neighbours (19: 16–19), while all witnesses, far from being allowed to retire from responsibility once evidence has been given, are required to cast the first stones (17: 7). Consequently, even false witnesses, undetected, not only become prey to attacks of conscience, but, in the unlawful killing of another, endanger their very souls.

Bearing witness then, tricky affair that it is, has long been
recognized as best conducted in groups. Within such groups, complex balances and counter-balances within personal (e.g. individual conscience) dynamic (e.g. exchange of perspectives between witnesses) and foundation (e.g. the cultural norms and Law of God) matrices, play their part. Thus, stoning apart, in Deuteronomy’s drift resides a very Foulkesian spirit – that is, ‘trust the group’. And yet, any conductor, be he or she ever so optimistic, might have good reason to remain wary, for, even with eight witnesses present, can we really be sure that it is the difficult, painful search for truth that binds witnesses together, and not an easy prejudice promising quick, if temporary, relief from our own frailties, our own culpability in shared crimes? Can we be certain that it is the ascendant forces of the healthy social ‘norm’ that drives the group inquiry, and not those of the raw, untransformed ‘anti-group’ (Nitsun, 1996)?

Such wariness need not be founded upon the notion of the anti-group. In bearing witness, the witness may be assailed, and his or her impartiality made partial, by unconscious forces both from within and from without. And whilst there may be good argument for attempting to deter the bearer of conscious deceit with threats of punishment, such threats, in the face of unconscious deception, are rendered impotent.

The witness at risk

Bearing witness not only stimulates intra-psychic anxiety but inter-psychic anxiety as well. The dangers such anxieties arouse can be real as well as imagined. The Greek for witness, for example, is Martûs, or Martûr (from which is derived the English word martyr): a person who gives testimony to the truth at the expense of his life. It is in this sense that the word ‘witness’ is generally employed in the New Testament (Cruden, 1954). This gives a new twist to an old adage: ‘one man’s truth is another man’s poison’. Hence the need for the witness protection programme.

Here is a contemporary example:

An LEA, aware their loose network of projects designed to serve the needs of children with emotional and behavioural problems was not producing the hoped-for results, looked to appoint a new manager at one of its centres. Jacob was this appointment.

Jacob was chosen not for his administrative or disciplinary skills but his flexible, empathic abilities and a proven track-record that
had earned him the respect of staff and pupils in several schools. Within a year, he and his small team had made good progress and Jacob, convinced that a therapeutic approach was more effective than an orthodox educational one, began a psychodynamic training. This training honed what had been intuitive skills, making him and his team more confident in proffering their approach for consideration in other centres. At this juncture, his relationship with other project-managers began to become polarised: a small number strongly allied themselves with him, more did not. His own line-manager became increasingly ambivalent. Within a year, a radical ‘re-organization’ was initiated. Asked to reapply first for an equivalent, then for inferior posts, he was finally made redundant. Most of his team suffered a similar fate.

Bion’s (1961) basic assumption pairing group serves well to explain the dynamics of this example. The LEA sought in Jacob and his team a messianic hope: the birth of a new, more effective approach. Yet, as Bion suggests, ‘Only by remaining a hope does hope exist’ ([1961] 1989: 151–152) and as this particular hope became flesh, it started to undermine the cohesion of the larger group. Witnessing a series of productive couplings (between Jacob and psychodynamic ideas, Jacob and his team, his team and others, all these and the children) gave rise to intense feelings of jealousy, envy, rivalry, exclusion, all of which threatened the life of the larger group. The response? – to sacrifice the ‘pairing’ and with it its proffered hope. Indeed, into the exiled scapegoat was projected all the split-off aspects of the larger group’s own potentially therapeutic inclinations. Thus, the wider programme was left impoverished and the remaining projects further weighed down by increasing curriculum initiatives and a profusion of assessment forms, goal setting and education plans.

The primal scene revisited
Brown ([1985] 2000) suggests that it is the primal scene, ‘the archetypal provoker of feelings of exclusion’, against which all basic assumption groups defend. The basic assumption dependence group’s defence is by means of regressive merger; the fight-flight group’s is exclusion (the existence of a third, though recognized, is kept external to the group); while the pairing group, as suggested, embraces the couple – that is the third in relation with the primary object – but does so in an idealized and controlled fashion. Should
the couple, in reality, produce a life of their own, another basic assumption, such as fight-flight is utilized, and the offending pair’s pro-creations expelled from the group.

Although many would argue about the applicability of basic assumption group theory to group-analytic practice, Nitsun (1994) suggests the primal scene is at the centre of all unstructured therapy groups. For me, if not at the centre, it certainly seems central, particularly when a group begins, and all members face simultaneously the reality of sharing. This entails the loss of exclusive possession of the loved object (lodged as it may be, for example, in the therapist) and the arousal of its attendant anxieties, including the paranoid fear of annihilation of self.

Anxieties concomitant with the primal scene are destined to re-emerge throughout the group’s life. Each new member/baby born out of the therapist’s coupling with that which is external, may stimulate such anxieties. As Foulkes suggests, ‘Coping with the arrival of an infant activates regression on the part of all family members’ (E. Foulkes, 1990: 238). In so doing, it offers an opportunity to work through unresolved issues, within the ‘T’ situation (Foulkes, 1964: 74), related to the developmental requirement of bearing witness.

The very process of enquiry into the dynamic activity in groups may also stir anxieties related to the primal scene. This may be because, as Nitsun (1994) remarks, the group may be unconsciously associated with the mother’s body (a view with which Foulkes and Bion concur). Thus exploration of it may give rise to paranoid-schizoid phantasies of discovering part of father inside mother (a reference to the terrifying combined parent figure (Klein, [1929] 1988) with feared associations of retaliatory attack.

At this point, I find it helpful to reframe the concept. Certainly the primal scene is essentially a psychosexual drama, and even McDougall’s more inclusive definition – the ‘total store of unconscious knowledge and personal mythology concerning the human sexual relation’ (McDougall (1980) cited in Nitsun, 1994: 130) – extends but does not modify this fact. Yet, it is, I think, an existential and social drama too – existential in that it embodies ideas of belonging and longing, inclusion and exclusion, the hope of creativity and the painfulness of loss; social because it deals with the child’s attempts to understand the nature of group and social processes, condensing these in the witnessing of one interaction, the developmental differentiating sequence of which group-analytic
therapy itself seeks to promote: that is, from ‘self’ to ‘self-and-other’ to ‘other-and-other’ to ‘group’. As Brown and Zinkin (1994b) point out:

The primal scene is of significance not only in terms of the Oedipus complex, but also the important move into the social world implied by the third position and the ‘law of the father’, renouncing infantile centrality in finding your place in society. (1994b: 246)

Such an acknowledgement of the centrality of the primal scene gives added poignancy to Foulkes’s ‘model of three’. Intimacy, after all, is both sought and feared in analytic groups: ‘intimacy involving openness and contact between people in the field of vision of other people’ (Brown, [1985] 2000: 217).

**Mirroring Revisited: the witness as bearer of triangulation**

Pines ([1982] 1998a) and Wooster (1983) draw on the story of Perseus to illustrate the need for a third position or perspective in the slaying of personal gorgons. Perseus’s journey is into the inner depths of the Psyche, of which the gorgon, Medusa, is symbolic of one ‘shadow-oriented’ aspect (Diel, 1980, cited in Pines, [1982] 1998). The stony paralysis and demise of those who have previously undertaken the same venture can be seen as resulting from an inability to contemplate the objective truth about themselves. Yet the success of the venture is vital to psychic development. Only by facing one’s inner demon, by capturing and taming it, is the individuation process furthered, the shadow-self integrated, and the creative potential both liberated and controlled. Thus the blood from Medusa’s neck gives life to Pegasus, the horse of the Muses, which enables Perseus to continue his psychic quest.

The point that Pines makes is that the gorgon can only be faced with the help of a third, in this instance Athena’s armour which, polished, becomes a mirror in which Perseus can witness Medusa and, in the witnessing, deal with her. Relating this to the group in which individual members may see mirrored, in other members’ interactions with each other, hated and disavowed aspects of their own selves, Pines suggests that what otherwise might lead to ‘entranced’ or ‘entangled’ forms of projection, characteristic of the dyad – a phenomenon on which Zinkin (1983a) elaborates in his notion of ‘malignant mirroring’ – ‘receives a triadic form of mirroring, one at a higher developmental level’. Through this triadic
mirroring, ‘a benign cycle of projection and introjection is initiated which can often lead to the freeing up of the closed psychic system and thereby to renewed psychic growth’ (Pines, [1982] 1998: 27).

Wooster (1983) suggests malignant mirroring – the absence of a third position – may find its source in deficits in early triangulation experiences. Here he draws, as does Pines ([1982], [1985] 1998), upon Abelin (1971, 1980) who, utilising both Piaget and Lacan, identifies the developmental stage at which the child, at 18 months, is forced, by the intrusion of the father, to become aware of exclusion from an imitative narcissistically-mirroring relationship with his mother. The child becomes an observer and, in so doing, recognising his separateness, enters a shared symbolic realm in which ‘reflection begins to replace reaction’ (my italics) (Pines [1982] 1998: 30). The child, in part, learns the capacity to observe and reflect from his father, who will have experienced exclusion from the ‘nursing couple’ (Winnicott, [1947] 1991: 88) and will, ideally, not only have tolerated it but, in the early stages, by protecting the mother-child dyad and respecting the mother’s ‘primary maternal preoccupation’ (Winnicott, [1956] 1992), have encouraged it as well (Skynner, 1976). In addition to being a rival, then, it is with the father that the child must identify. A ‘favourable outcome’ to the child’s witness training programme may thus depend upon ‘the positive and emulatory aspect of the three-person jealousy inherent in the situation’. This, in turn, is very much informed by the ‘father’s own capacity to work through his initial jealousy about this intrusive newcomer breaking up the original husband/wife duo’ (Wooster, 1983: 38). It is the absence of such a ‘favourable outcome’ that may lead, Wooster suggests, to malignant mirroring.

Zinkin (1983b) points out that Abelin’s focus is on the second year of life, while Zinkin, following Winnicott, suggests mirroring, whether good or bad, begins at the very beginning of life. He thus presents two possibilities:

either that triangulation occurs from the beginning or . . . some other explanation is required for the very early internalisation of the (good or bad) mirroring (1983b: 40)

and then, quickly, dismisses the former. I would suggest, however, that the experience of triangulation, as outlined and developed by Britton (1989, 1998), might indicate the validity of a different response. As Pines ([1982] 1998) suggests, it is the mirror as ‘third
element’, intervening as it does in the negative dyadic relationship, that creates the psychological space for dialogue and for exploration. Where there is no triangulation of space, there is ‘no capacity for reflection and for meeting on shared ground.’ This means that there can be ‘no acceptance of an aspect of self that is reflected in the other and also of the other in the self’ (Pines, [1982] 1998: 34). In the therapy group, if neither party can manage the reflexive activity of witnessing their own interactions, other witnesses – the therapist and other group members – must be called.

The witness and the bearing of difference

the history of society and culture is, in large measure, a history of the struggle with the endlessly complex problems of difference and otherness (Taylor, 1987: xxi, cited in Apprey, 2001: 101)

Although the foundations of self are laid in the experience of sameness, the development of self, of identity, grows out of ‘otherness’, out of a gradual patterning of experiences of difference (Battersby, 1998).

Pines’s description of group ‘cohesion’ and ‘coherence’ identifies something similar ([1985] 1998: 59–62). Cohesion, suggests Pines, is a physical analogy. It is about material things sticking together. ‘Bonding’, as defined by Bowlby (1988) can be seen in this light: a description of forces that hold infant and mother together. Psychologically then, cohesion offers a basic state of safety which, once secured, can provide a ‘base’ from which to explore.

Sticking together in a group, although providing a sense of safety, has developmental disadvantages. It is a defensive posture in which group boundaries become impermeable and the presence of difference within those boundaries, expunged. What is expunged within, finds a ‘third’ without: a container – group, nation or idea – into which the split-off aspects of difference are projected. Thus merger (relations within the group) and polarization (relations with what is perceived as outside the group) are both examples of linear relating, evidence of spatial collapse, of reaction replacing reflection, of the fact that a witness cannot be born(e).

In contrast, ‘coherence’ implies a mindful, organizational unity: an aesthetic achievement reached through the reflective and resonant interaction of different parts. Coherence does not sacrifice difference for the purposes of safety, but accommodates it (Piaget, 1952), by working towards a shared understanding, into an ever-evolving
whole. The struggle for coherence is a dialectical struggle, constantly in motion. ‘Inclusivity’ is its motto; identity its aim. These only become practicable if what is inevitably excluded – the ‘logic of identity’ (Derrida, [1967] 1976) is, after all, always dependent upon that which is not identified with – can be constantly reconnected: re-born(e) into the fold.

Difference, or diversity, functions as a ‘third object in dissolving an over-cohesive matrix symbolizing the mother-child’ (Thygesen, 1992: 75). The activity of witnessing, of bearing the difference, is the facilitator of the dialectical flow of the group, the instigator of pro-creative, connective momentum and the midwife to innumerable experiential births that constitute growth and change.

Bearing difference separates the witness out from the linear relationships being enacted. This separateness promotes the spatial relations necessary for reflection, the search for meaning and the mature resolution of emotional conflict. It is a role that, initially, is unlikely to be appreciated, since the activity of mature witnessing, embodying as it does the third position, interrupts the merged relationship and challenges the dynamics of polarization. Ultimately, as the disavowed finds its place within the individual and within the group, the changes wrought may be experienced as enriching. Yet, the further relinquishment of the monotropic bond to life (Bowlby, 1988) and the dissolving of the ‘group illusion’ (Anzieu, 1984) echoes old losses and may re-evoke ‘unthought’ (Bollas, 1987) – that is unprocessed – deeply embodied ‘memories’ of old cataclysmic fears and pains.

Conclusion
The witness is the advocate and bearer of objectivity and of objective self-consciousness (Duval and Wicklund, 1972) – ‘a form of consciousness in which we feel ourselves to be social objects, part of the social world and aware of ourselves as objects’ (Pines, [1982] 1998a: 35). By being a witness to his or her own experience and to the ‘actions, reactions and interactions’ of others, the witness engages in a civilizing process characterized by the capacity to attend to an other’s point of view, to discriminate and, where appropriate, integrate the value of that which is ‘other’, whilst maintaining a unique sense of individuality in the process of doing so (James, 1994; see also Winnicott, [1958] 1990, [1969] 1974).
Such principled tolerance is core to co-operative efforts and central in the maintenance of a mature democracy.

Where nine witnesses (including the conductor) are gathered together, the group’s capacity to bear witness to the ‘actions, reactions and interactions within the therapeutic situation’ (Foulkes, 1964: 82) and, through dialogue, to exchange experiences of what is borne, is a sign of health. Conversely, an absence of witnessing – a closing down to the experience of bearing difference in self and others – is a sign of immature thinking and/or psychological disturbance. For this reason, there is an important sense in which a fundamental aspect of the group-analytic endeavour may be defined as, ‘witness training in action’.

References


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