

# GROUP ANALYTIC IDENTITY: CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES IN THE AGE OF THE SMARTPHONE

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## ABSTRACT

This talk will address some of the contemporary dilemmas and challenges to group analytic praxis. The focus will be on the therapy component of the tripartite training structure and its key role in the internalisation of group analytic identity (identities). The effects of our networked, digital, globalised socio-political context and of changing patterns of communication and relationship, on dynamic administration and on working analytically with unconscious process, will be explored.

## KEY WORDS

Internet networks, group analysis, online communication, constructing identities, unconscious processes, online/offline self

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## INTRODUCTION

Analytic therapy methodology promotes the creation of a constant, stable, bounded and unstructured space to facilitate the emergence and translation of unconscious processes. In our digital age, the texture and nature of boundaries has transformed: political boundaries shift from permeable and porous boundaries to solid barriers and walls (Mexico, Israel and now the UK), and back again; economic boundaries are being renegotiated; time/space boundaries have compressed; the boundary between self and other, the real and the virtual (symbolic), private and public, work and leisure has changed.

Our relationship to the past, present and future changes with our current culture of semi-permanent, online connectivity.

The internet is here to stay and is, and will be, a major factor influencing our future development, our communication processes and our lifestyles for good and, potentially, for bad. I have no doubt about the benefits of the internet, particularly in relation to developing and extending our cognitive powers, making life "easier" and encouraging engagement in political and cultural processes. In the last 15 years or so, with the rise of relating over social media, our social relationships, in addition to face-to-face (f2f) relating,

take place in a virtual domain and are machine-mediated.

We now live in a globalised, networked society that is vastly different to the networks that Foulkes (1) described. Our connection to networks has changed forever. The internet and mobile technologies have provided infinite possibilities to access and be part of virtual, disembodied networks and groups that are located in a different medium, in cyberspace, and that allow for a globalised reach in an instant. These networks, social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, online courses, discussion groups, forums, support groups and interest groups are more or less interactive. We can interact and belong in a different dimension, mediated through a screen, the mobile screen that we carry around on our person or within easy access. Social networking is developing a language of its own and new collective cultures are emerging, with their own codes of conduct (netiquette). These codes are in constant flux and vary between different kinds of online groups; what's acceptable in one form may be unacceptable in another scenario.

We now relate in two parallel universes: in real life, face to face (f2f), and in the virtual world of cyberspace.

Today I want to explore some of the effects of our changing patterns of connecting to others and how these may influence the construction of identities, and to consider implications for group analytic praxis.

I think group analysis with its emphasis on **context** (2), social, historical and current, on *finding meaning in context*, is in an advantageous position to examine the implications of de-contextualised communication. What characterises online communication as different from f2f relating, is *the loss of context and the loss of the richness of non-verbal, embodied communication*, and in my opinion these losses increase the possibilities for misunderstanding significantly. The use of emojis (graphic symbols, e.g. facial expressions, smileys, etc) and of animated images is a poor substitute for the non-verbal cues that play such a significant role in the expression of emotions. And the abbreviated language of text (cu l8ter, for "see you later") and twitter (140 characters) adds to this movement towards less articulate, "thinner" communication. In our attempt to translate unconscious process in group analysis, our aim is, paradoxically, the opposite of what happens online – we aim to increase articulation and use all the cues available to promote the understanding of self and other. And we move between immersion in relating and encouraging reflection. There is little encouragement and opportunity for reflection in online social media communication.

The original promise of the internet of equal online status, of equal access to information, of a democratising process that allows the voiceless to be heard and creativity to flourish, with that online life being an enabling, freeing and enriching experience, is now being challenged. Big data companies, Google, Facebook, Ama-



zon and many others can track us (now including our bodily selves – through the smartphone and with the new fashion for Fitbits) and can use and can sell the data for less altruistic purposes, such as commercial gain, for propaganda purposes and political influence (e. g. the proliferation of “fake news” on a global scale). The power and control that has shifted to such companies is less visible and, in the complexity of our globalised world, more difficult to regulate to ensure benign rather than toxic effects.

## CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES

Sometimes, in preparing patients for a therapy group and indicating what such a group may have to offer, I say: “Group analytic therapy groups provide a rich medium for the exploration of identity issues” and the reconstruction of one’s sense of self.

The construction of identities, including professional identities, is a dynamic process, always taking place in a relational network, constructed on the basis of who we feel we belong with, and who we do not, constructed through the process of identifying similarities and difference, identifying and differentiating. Identities are co-constructed, constantly shaped by the social context, by how we are identified by others.

Erikson (3) and Foulkes (1) wrote at a similar historical period (the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), prior to the rise of the internet and the world wide web.

Erik Erikson’s writings on identity fit comfortably into the group analytic paradigm, emphasizing the *dynamic, ever-changing* construction of the self, and the constant interplay between the psychological and the social. I quote again from his prologue to “Identity: Youth and Crisis”:

“[...] nor can we separate [...] the identity crisis in individual life and contemporary crises in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other. In fact, the whole interplay between the psychological and the social, the developmental and the historical, for which identity formation is of prototypical significance, could be conceptualized only as a kind of *psychosocial relativity*” (3, p.23).

In the last couple of decades the twin revolutions in information technology and biotechnology and increasing globalisation, accompanied by growing political uncertainties (the UK’s Brexit fiasco being a prime example) and crises, the climate change crisis, economic uncertainties as technology and robotics threaten the labour market and employment (we see many “psychological treatments” going online), constitutes, in my view, what Erikson referred to as “a contemporary crisis in historical development.” The accelerated rate of change makes the world increasingly unpredictable.

I am arguing that the process of constructing identities in the new millenni-

um is significantly different from identity formation in the age of Erikson and Foulkes.

1. Suler (4) writes about identity and personality which he describes as constellations of emotion, memory and thinking **that are interconnected with certain environments**. Different environments might draw out certain aspects of the personality and ways of relating whilst hiding others. These clusters or constellations may be more or less integrated or dissociated, coherent or fragmented. **Online identity "may be more or less integrated or dissociated"** (4, p321-26) **from our offline identity(s)**.

In 1970, I was employed for one year on a qualitative study doing field research as part of a project on race relations (5). This took place in the aftermath of the race riots in Britain in the late 50's. We interviewed families with two adolescent children, from three different racial groups in an area which had large numbers of immigrants, at a time in the 60's and 70's of virulent anti-immigrant feeling (6).

Dr Sherwood's analysis of the extensive material recorded for this field study (5) used Erikson's writings on identity conflicts (3) as an analytic tool to explore in depth how identity conflicts and structures might relate to the use and misuse of racial groups, and how as part of an interactive spiral, such use and misuse of target racial groups might in turn affect these unresolved identity conflicts.

A model was developed showing how unresolved identity conflicts (identified through extensive case history material) in relatively fragile personalities, in interaction with a range of important social, psychological and environmental activators and constraints, either propels people towards racial prejudice and misuse, or constrains them from doing so.

Examples of activators that can generate destructive spirals are the particular social ideologies (and their legitimation in institutions) that give cultural licence to the dehumanization of selected scapegoats and racial groups. The stress of sudden change, with the loss of familiar objects and a familiar environment for both immigrant and host community, can also act as a major activator of spiralling and destructive prejudice; as can periods of recession, unemployment and social deprivation.

On the other hand, constraints rather than activators may operate in social systems that embrace egalitarianism and democracy and cultural diversity, and encode non-discriminatory practices in their policies and laws, or in systems that provide for a continuity of experience that may temper the loss of familiarity.

If the study referred to above was being conducted now, we would be interviewing adolescents born into a world of 24/7 (24 hours, 7 days a week) connectivity and a significant proportion of their social relating would be online, through so-



cial media. Apart from relationships in the family, school, work, the neighbourhood, the streets, etc., we would need to include, as a relational domain, (the history of) their online habits and relational activities on social media. Today we might need to consider both an online self and identity (often idealized) and an offline self and identity (with its internalized personalized life story) and the relationship between them, in order to get a picture of the self at any given time (6).

My focus today is on the impact of semi-permanent connectivity, and of excessive disembodied relating, and how it may relate to the structuring of the self and the ongoing construction of identities.

## OUR CHANGING WORLD AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITIES

In these fractured times, *belonging* to virtual groups can go a long way towards counterbalancing the increasing disconnection in our real-life, interpersonal networks, and alleviating feelings of isolation and disconnection. Being made aware in the process of connecting that one is part of a network - a nodal point firing off in a complex interconnected web - could be exciting and could give some temporary relief and comfort from states of insecurity and alienation. (It follows that "being connected" would offer itself readily as a focus for addictive behaviour.)

Online groups can provide a refuge for those whose isolation is driven by relational difficulties, providing comfort in the face of regularly avoided face-to-face contact. It may, for particular subjects, be the best possible adaptation in the circumstances - or it may provide an easy option that unnecessarily sustains and increases relational difficulties and isolation. Susan Greenfield (7), neuroscientist and Senior Research Fellow at Oxford University, describes research that suggests some parallels between heavy internet use and autistic-like behaviour.

The internet has, I think, a significant potential therapeutic value. As with the climate change debate, where the dangers of slow, cumulative overuse of fossil fuels are unseen until manifested in climate change, so is the case with the communications technology revolution, where I think the dangers of **overuse** of disembodied, screen-mediated communication may remain unseen until manifested through changes in our identities as humans.

### A CLINICAL VIGNETTE

#### the "#MeToo" movement permeates the therapy group

(names and identifying details have been changed)

*In a weekly, slow-open therapy group that has a relatively stable membership and a solid, therapeutic working culture, the following group session took place at*

*the height of the #MeToo movement, in the late Autumn of 2017:*

*There are 7 members in the group, 4 men and 3 women, whose age varies from early thirties to early sixties, a diverse group with a mix of religious backgrounds, class and nationalities. All members have at some stage indicated their use of the internet; for some, reporting on internet dating and meet-up groups, for others, extensive time on Twitter and Facebook.*

*The first half of the group was centred on Bashir (a refugee), who was returning to the group after a 2-week absence. He had accompanied his mother (this was the first time she had been back since she'd come to the UK) in a return visit to the country he'd fled from many years earlier (with some risk attached) to see his father. Bashir had described his parents' relationship as always volatile, explosive and abusive.*

*Bashir described how he attempted to mediate in a fight that broke out early in the visit between his parents, when his father tried to force himself sexually onto his mother and threatened to use the law to stop her returning to the UK. Two women in the group (Anne and Claudia), along with two of the men, expressed their outrage at this blatant attempt at the abuse of male power.*

*Anne, the youngest member of the group, who admits spending a lot of time on social media and was at the time following the #MeToo movement on Twitter (she had some time earlier confessed an "ad-*

*diction" to having her smartphone with her and always keeping it turned on), talked about her experience of sexual harassment "on a daily basis".*

*Together with David, Bashir aligns against male sexual violence and control.*

*At one point, Martin (the oldest member in the group) says to Bashir and the group: "Can't we find anything positive about your father?"*

*And then a fight breaks out in the group between David and Martin, with David accusing Martin of gross insensitivity, with Martin feeling insulted and hurling insults back, both shouting at each other. Anne and Claudia accuse Martin and Matt of insensitivity and misogyny – and continue to rant about male patriarchy. The third woman, Sally, says women too can be aggressive – her mother could be very provocative – and she herself, would enjoy getting wolf-whistled in the street!*

*The group ends with Matt's attempt to move away from what he described as the expression of "political" attitudes, to the "personal" – to what it means for group members personally.*

*My attempts to intervene, to encourage reflection, were drowned out by the intensity of the expressed anger. Attempts by group members to move away from stereotyped black and white thinking (fathers/men all bad, females all innocent) or to link to early identifications with parental figures were not responded to or followed up.*



I suggest that this is an example of what Mary Aiken (8) refers to as **cyber-migration**, how online rules of engagement and norms might filter back in to real-life social behaviour. Could this be the social unconscious at work?

This session was characterised by amplification of affect, by argument rather than discussion of ideas, by resistance to reflection and analysis, by polarisation and by unusually aggressive, insulting interchanges. The group reminded me of typical “flame wars” (now often described as trolling) on social networking sites.

We may view this session as some kind of manifestation of Bashir’s very powerful story of sexual violence between his parents being enacted in the here and now of the group. However, the atmosphere and texture of the communication suggest to me the additional influence of online experience.

Group analytic method, with its emphasis on the (social) context, constructs a **boundary** or membrane that is porous/**semi-permeable** to influences from the surrounding (social) context and, in clinical groups analysis, impermeable to leakage from inside the group to the outside world (to protect confidentiality and facilitate analysis). We cannot observe disembodied, online relating without being part of the process; we therefore *infer* its influence on real-life communication patterns and behaviour.

In the example above, it was the atypical, polarised interaction, the reduced artic-

ulation so typical of the language of text, emoticons and Twitter (which stands in contrast to our group analytic aims to increase articulation in a communicational field), hostile verbalisations, the resistance to reflection or consideration of contextual determinants, that led me to infer a cyber-migration of online patterns of communication into real life interactions in the group.

The most vociferous voices in the group came from those who, either due to their young age or their particular jobs or interests, use social media the most.

I think that in Anne’s case her use of online media, combined with many years in group analysis, actually aided her capacity for (disinhibited) expression of her anger in a way that strengthened her confidence socially and helped shift her lifelong tendency towards depression (an example of benign ODE, see below).

John Suler (4) writes persuasively about the “Online Disinhibition Effect” (ODE) in both its benign and toxic forms.

He identifies the following factors contributing to ODE:

The power to keep one’s identity concealed and invisible amplifies the disinhibition effect, as does not having to deal with someone’s immediate reaction. Suler (4, p. 321-26) suggests that absent f2f cues may lead some to feel that their mind has merged with the mind of their online companion, as if that person has magically been introjected into one’s

psyche, and that they might split or dissociate online fiction from offline fact, thereby increasing the potential for disinhibition. When they are online, in what feels like peer or "equal" relationships, with the appearance of minimized "authority", people are much more willing to speak out and misbehave. The online disinhibition effect will interact with personality variables, the underlying feelings and needs, the strength of defence systems and tendencies towards inhibition or expression.

Connectivity and being connected are not necessarily the same (9-11).

The sense of belonging is different from mere connection.

Sherry Turkle, a psychoanalytically trained psychologist and the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) expert on technology and society, has spent decades in anthropological research interviewing people across the life cycle with regard to their views and practices in the digital world. In her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (11, p.59-99) she argues that with the ease of remaining connected 24/7 we live with the illusion of never having to be alone. She suggests that we only feel ourselves in the process of connecting ("I share therefore I am"), and she describes our increasing addiction to "being connected" as more like a symptom than a cure. She regards continual connection as undermining the capacity for solitude, and a reduced capacity for

solitude as undermining capacities for self-reflection; and reduced capacities for solitude and self-reflection are undermining the capacities for intimacy.

In his paper on "The Capacity to be Alone" (12), Winnicott considers this to be one of the most important signs of maturity in emotional development. He links the capacity to be alone to having the experience of "good-enough mothering" and thus building a belief in a benign environment, rather than the expectations of a persecutory one. To quote Winnicott: "[T]he ability to be truly alone has as its basis being alone in the presence of someone" (12, p.33) (usually one's mother). "In this way an infant with weak ego organisation may be alone because of reliable ego-support [...] and gradually the ego-supportive environment is introjected" (12, p. 36). And that "without a sufficiency of this experience the capacity to be alone cannot develop" (12, p.33).

Some authors have likened the cyberspace medium to Winnicott's transitional space (13) that allows for play directed to facilitating the slow differentiation of self from other, the recognition of the other as a separate self. Playing in the virtual world provides an arena for the experimentation with "performing" aspects of one's identity in a way that might enhance and enrich opportunities for constructing identity. Or it might lead certain personalities, hooked on online play, to remain locked into transitional space. This will create problems for separating the self from the other.





## SHIFTING BOUNDARIES - WHERE ARE WE NOW

Changing boundaries have an impact on the therapeutic practice in many ways:

### Role boundaries

The analytic boundaries that define our therapist-client role are compromised. Analytic therapists traditionally remain relatively opaque to our patients; we don't openly disclose personal details in order to preserve possibilities for the analysis of transference, and to protect against the misuse of the patient/client for our own needs. In f2f mode, group analysis allows for more transparency than traditional psychoanalytic approaches.

The erosion of the boundary between the private and the public that accompanies internet use applies to both therapist and client internet users. Many patients now check out their therapists on the web and may identify them on social media such as Twitter. I've had supervisees express frustration - they don't feel free to use online dating sites in case they are identified by or meet their patients on such sites. Attempting to construct a "stranger" group can also become more difficult. A supervisee recently reported the experience of a new member joining her group and encountering the woman who had rejected him after meeting on an online dating site - which is difficult to predict from an assessment.

## The boundary between the real and the virtual

Turkle (10) tells some chilling stories: of her 7-year-old daughter, already an expert in simulated fish tanks who, during a boat-ride on the Mediterranean, saw a jellyfish and said: "Look Mommy, a jellyfish. It looks so realistic". Clearly for her daughter the simulated jellyfish was the familiar one and therefore constituted her reality. She tells other stories of children who prefer the simulated to the real.

For millennials, this blurring of boundaries between the simulated and the real must affect our capacity to symbolise. Shall we, in the future, live in a semi-permanent transitional space - where the boundary between real life others and virtual others blurs in a way that changes the architecture of our intrapsychic worlds and facilitates objectification and depersonalisation of the "other"?

## The boundary between the conscious and the unconscious process

The collapse of the temporal-spatial field into a timeless, infinite zone removes time-space boundaries and takes us into the timeless zone of ahistoricist, primary process thinking, devoid of reality testing. When we are online, we live in the continuous present of the here-and-now.

Are our group analytic conceptual and methodological tools fit for this purpose?

Are they appropriate for the translation of the unconscious process in online networks? Foulkes (14) provides us with four viewing levels: current, projective (part object), transference (whole object) and primordial. On the current level, we can use our systemic frame to analyse the structural aspects of online networks; projection is, I think, intensified in online relating: parts of ourselves projected onto parts of imagined others, objectified through the screen, with little opportunity for reclaiming projections and increased possibilities of relational ruptures.

The analytic conceptual tools we use to explore the whole object on the transference level, namely projective and introjective identification and mirroring processes, and group concepts such as the notion of role suction, someone acting as spokesperson for the group, are I think less useful for the analysis of online relating as they rely heavily on non-verbal cues, cues which are not available in many online groups and social media platforms. The work of *containment* and of the *translation* of unconscious process is at the core of our practice. Online communication favours part-object relating, rather than relating to the person as a whole, in context. We cannot assume that the identificatory mechanisms, identifying with unseen, imagined others, are the same as in f2f relating, where the other is present, visible and responsive.

And what of the usefulness of a view from the primordial level, the resonance

level? Our foundation matrix is in the process of becoming globalised. National, cultural, ethnic boundaries blur and lose their solidity and clarity, and we see reactive attempts to re-establish them with walls or barriers. The globalisation of our foundation matrix is occurring online and brings with it a need for a creative re-assessment of Foulkes's notion of the foundation matrix (which he said so little about!). In the example above, I attempt to demonstrate the possible migration of social media communication styles into real life relationships. At the primordial level, my concern is that the binary systems (the binary coding, 0 and 1) that underpins most computer programs and the like/dislike, tick box culture that goes with it, will, in times to come, with excessive online activity, encourage binary thinking, either/or thinking that sees no grey areas, that is at the heart of polarisation processes and fundamentalist thinking.

### **The boundaries between the self and the other: constructing identities in the age of the smartphone**

Love bonds, the kinds of bonds made in early life, provide the template for later relationships where we express and explore identity in social interaction, both online and offline.

Our culture of semi-permanent connectivity impacts our love bonds in different ways and at different stages of develop-



ment. The digital age will in my view, be accompanied by a paradigmatic shift in the structuring of our collective human psyche. At this point in time we can only speculate as to the direction and shape of such change.

A developmental perspective:

An infant arriving in today's world is likely to engage with a mother (or primary caretaker) who holds a smartphone in her hand or places it nearby. What does this do to the state of reverie, of "primary maternal preoccupation" (15), when the outside world actively and constantly impinges? And with the mother's gaze distracted by constant attention to the smartphone, will this fragment the mirroring so crucial to the forming of a sense of self?

The transition from the omnipotent baby to the recognition of the (m)other as a separate, autonomous entity, so important in the development of the capacity for mutuality and reciprocity in relationships may be compromised by the insertion of the smartphone between mother and baby. And later, when children separate from the family and move into the social world of school and other environments, is the ongoing separation process hindered by the ease of staying connected to one's mother? Spatial separation is modified by possibilities of always-on connectivity. How will this influence the development of an autonomous self?

Finding one's place, one's role in groups is a crucial aspect of the adolescent identity challenge. We can now "belong" to infinite

numbers of online groups in addition to our offline groups. Now teenagers can try out different identities and roles in a context free of reality testing and without the richness of f2f relating. This could provide a rich arena for identity exploration. But a strong or resilient identity relies on a sense of continuity and integrity; always on-connectivity disrupts this continuity, and diminished self-reflection challenges the integrity of our sense of self.

There is much concern currently in the UK about the significant increase in mental health disorders in children and adolescents (millennials), and an explosion of research on possible links to internet use, especially to the use of social media.

## CLINICAL VIGNETTE

*A young lesbian patient in her early twenties talked about how, prior to her teens, she strongly identified with being a boy - to the extent that her family called her by a boy's name. This changed during her teens when she felt increasingly comfortable with a hybrid male/female identity. She said she felt convinced that if she was a 10-year-old in the world of today, with the support of her family she would have considered transgender re-construction. She expressed relief and pleasure that she hadn't resorted to this.*

*She also described how she got angry in a discussion with a group of friends about the pressure to conform to the current politically correct feminist position on*

*bisexuality. She described her anger as "performative anger". When I asked her what she meant by this, she said that it was a conscious and controlled expression and definition of her views and identity, rather than a simple spontaneous expression of anger.*

This spoke to me of change over the generations: towards a more conscious performing of the self, of the construction of identities. It referred to the contemporary fluidity of gender roles and identities, of the construction and performing of the self that is part of the ongoing activities in the playground of the virtual world. We are now able to reconstruct our bodies and our gendered selves and have more choice in how we communicate, how we relate to the social, how we live together and how we group together.

I am asking you today: how do we hold onto our core group-analytic identity in the face of the accelerating expansion of and increasing fluidity in the categories and groups (including professional groups) with which we can identify?

Therapeutic modalities have proliferated, particularly the short-term manualised treatments. Many group analysts (in the UK) seek additional training (usually short-term) in order to secure their livelihoods in the face of an uncertain future for analytic therapies. And there are increasing opportunities for online talk therapy. I don't think it will be too long until we begin to see online group analytic groups. Psychoanalytic practice and training embraces the use of online

supervision, and, less frequently, online therapy in circumstances where therapy and training would otherwise not be possible (16). There is a growing psychoanalytic literature on the limits and potentialities of such online analysis/supervision.

At this point we need to raise our awareness of the implications for us all, of spending more of our life in cyberspace; and as group analysts, we need to both apply our understanding to online groups and explore in depth the limits and potentialities of online relating, and expand our theory to adjust to the digital age.

In my talk on "Evolving group analytic identity" (17), I suggested that Group Analysis needs to adapt to the contemporary historical moment by "extending our multi-perspectival view of the person, the group, the matrix to include the 'online self' and the dynamics of relating in cyberspace – introducing a fifth viewing level, a cyberspace level or domain"; that we need to extend our *activities into the field of public health, offering face-to-face groups to balance and counter the effects* of increasing time spent in online relating (here I think we're going to have to work harder at introducing and maintaining reflective activity in our groups); and that we need to reassess our theoretical frame and methodology in the light of the effects of our globalised, digitalised contemporary society (17, p. 432-33).

I hope I have hereby continued this conversation, asked some important questions and taken this exploration a few steps further.



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