

MANY INNER GROUPS, ONE OUTER GROUP

S H Foulkes, the originator of group analysis, noticed that when a group of people meet for the first time, they unconsciously bring with them expectations and beliefs based on their own life experiences, history and culture. ¹ It is as though each individual brings along their own inner group of assumptions and expectations of relationships through which they view the outer group, the other people in it and the task. These individual inner groups combine to form the ground, which Foulkes called the 'foundation matrix', from which the group slowly evolves.

As group participants interact with each other, they actively and consciously develop a new system of relationships based on how they actually experience each other in the group. The limiting assumptions they brought with them begin to lose their power. A 'dynamic matrix' that supports the work of the group gradually evolves. It can be thought of as an "interconnecting web of relationships" that holds together the interactions of the whole group "and gives meaning to material as it emerges". ² Like a womb, this dynamic matrix needs to be carefully nurtured in order for it to fulfil its function of bringing conception to fruition.

The dynamic matrix is like a delicate web that holds the interactions of the group together. As individuals talk to each other, they discover that the expectations they brought with them do not necessarily reflect the expectations and assumptions of other individuals in the group. As they weave the web of the dynamic matrix through their relationships within the group, they become conscious of the original foundation matrix they came with.

The foundation matrix, which is there from the beginning, provides a reference point for the dynamic matrix. Over time, as individuals understand their differences, the group's shared view of reality changes to provide a good enough basis for working together constructively. The dynamic matrix that emerges supports the work of the group. This process is rather like reading and updating a map of a constantly changing landscape. ³ As group members engage in sustained dialogue they notice that the atmosphere is changing. Slowly they realise that by speaking what is on their minds they are altering the climate of the group and, in turn, collective understanding alters. Noticing these shifts is crucial. Individuals then realise that they have the power to change their situation.

The core dynamic of change in dialogue processes involves people getting some perspective on their thoughts and thought processes, and on the way, those thought processes shape their perceptions of reality. ⁴

Distrust is often a component of the foundation matrix as I have learnt in my work with residents on social housing estates. After watching from the side-lines for years while physical changes are made about which they are rarely if ever consulted, it is not surprising that residents have little trust. When finally invited to participate, residents often react with either lifeless apathy or barely disguised rage that often erupts with daunting ferocity. For designers such reactions may seem incomprehensible and give rise to the question, "Why aren't these people glad that we are finally doing something?" The anger can be understood in terms of a foundation matrix engendered by past experiences of being consistently ignored or dismissed. When working with such groups, it is possible to change this foundation matrix, in which distrust is a given, by making time for all group members to talk about their experiences so that a dynamic matrix is generated and the possibility of trust becomes a given.

When I started working with tenants on the Old Loughborough Estate in London, I encountered enormous quantities of anger and mistrust. Like many housing estates in the 1980s, this one suffered problems of leaking roofs, deteriorated brick facing, windows falling out and poor refuse collection facilities. The housing authority ignored these large-scale structural problems and, noting that the flats had become 'hard to let', designated the estate for internal refurbishment with new kitchens, bathrooms and central heating. To introduce this programme of 'package improvements', the Director of Housing invited everyone concerned to a public meeting, including the tenants, local councillors, the police,

¹ S. H., Foulkes, *Introduction to Group-Analytic Psychotherapy*, Heinemann, (London) 1948. Reprinted (London) Karnac, 1983.

² S. H., Foulkes, *Therapeutic Group Analysis*, Allen and Unwin (London) 1964, Reprinted (London) Karnac, 1984.

³ Douglas, A., 'Mapping the matrix: Healing vision and communication', *Group Analysis*, 2002, vol 35, pp 89-103.

⁴ Bohm, D., *Changing Consciousness*, 1991.

community workers, council officers. At this meeting, the tenants responded with outrage to the council's 'generous offer' to 'package improve' their flats shouting that their intelligence was being insulted.

As I later discovered, many of these tenants had given up any hope of being listened to and taken seriously. They brought with them a foundation matrix full of mistrust that made it very difficult for them to trust anyone in authority. By not asking residents what they thought first, the housing department had further reinforced their expectation that nobody would listen to them. I started by letting it be known that she would be in a particular flat on the estate at a regular time each week. Anybody could come and talk with me. Tenants came slowly at first, one at a time, drank tea and told me about their lives. This process continued over several months.

A group developed that continued to take an active role in working with me. Through talking and more talking the fragile foundation matrix full of mistrust became a dynamic matrix that enabled participants to believe that things could change for the better. These informal meetings reinforced my belief that the tenants knew exactly what the priorities were. They could make responsible decisions. As they desperately wanted to get the fabric of their homes dry, they decided to have the roofs repaired, the windows fixed and the brick facades re-pointed first and to defer the new kitchens, bathrooms and heating. Although with hindsight this seems a logical decision to take, at the time it risked losing funding for the more exciting improvements to the interiors of their homes. For that they had to wait patiently for another two or three years. Given life as many of them had lived it, this waiting was an exercise in trust but the dynamic matrix that had evolved allowed them to believe that the changes would happen. And, they did.

Many years later I bumped into an ex-tenant from this estate. He recognised me and told me that our work had changed the lives of many people.