

# Freud's Ideas about Groups in Relation to His Experiences in the Psychoanalytic Movement and the Secret Committee

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A critical reading of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), a work presenting Freud's approach to groups, leads to the conclusion that Freud discusses the group as if it were an individual. Freud's phylogenetic fantasy, as it appears in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), is used here to elucidate the problems inherent in this reduction in Freud's conceptualization. Bion (1961) pointed out the blind spot in Freud's view of groups, which is a function of Freud's position as the creator of psychoanalysis and the leader of the psychoanalytic movement. Following Bion's criticism, I suggest another reflection on Freud's approach to groups, demonstrating that an historical account of the psychoanalytic movement in general and of the secret committee in particular, enables a more comprehensive understanding of Freud's conceptualization of groups. I argue that Freud's experience in those groups was in the background of his writing about groups, and influenced his conceptualization.

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The gist of Freud's argument in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* is that the behavior of people in groups is explained by the same psychological processes occurring in each individual member of the group (1921: 116). According to Freud's explanation, the group is structured by identification processes of individuals identical in their relation to the leader and to the other participants – each individual creates a vertical libidinal tie in relation to the leader by means of replacing his ego ideal with the image of the leader, and each individual creates horizontal libidinal ties in relation to all the others by means of identification of his ego with the other participants in the group, who are in an identical position in relation to the leader (1921: 116). According to Freud's explanation, the group is composed of individuals identical in their relation to the leader and to the other participants; that is, group phenomena are explained here by means of the mechanisms that create libidinal ties, the same mechanisms used to explain the mental life of an individual.

A critical reading of this work reveals that Freud's approach to psychoanalytic understanding of social phenomena is based on disavowal of the difference between the individual and the group, disavowal that incorporates the outer reality of the group into the inner reality of the individual. Freud locates group psychology within individual psychology, based on the argument that other people are involved in the mental life of the individual from within and from without at the same time. Since all social activity in the outer reality is connected to mental activity in the inner reality, from the outset Freud dismisses the distinction between internal mental activity – fantasies relating to the other, and external social activity – real actions relating to the other in the social arena (*ibid.* 69).

It seems that Freud's argument is based on the assumption that in the unconscious there is no distinction between fantasy and action; an erotic or aggressive wish is experienced as an actual act, with all the inevitable psychic consequences. But in the external social reality as well as in the internal conscious reality there is no such identity – the distinction between fantasy and action is clear and sound. Freud ignores the complex relations between inside and outside, and actually reduces the group to the unconscious within the individual's psyche, an all-embracing, all-inclusive unconscious. Such a reduction enables an interpretation of the anxiety-provoking group phenomena as if it were a manifestation of the individual's unconscious – which is already familiar to psychoanalysis; in this sense the reduction of the group to the individual serves as a defense against primitive anxieties evoked not only by participating in groups, but even by observing group phenomena.

Freud's reduction of the group to an individual is based on the analogy he delineates between the hypnotic situation and the group situation, an analogy that turns into an identity. Freud isn't satisfied with the analogy, comparing the relation of the group to the leader to the relation of the hypnotized to the hypnotist. He argues that it is actually an identity: "But ...we may also say that the hypnotic relation is (if the expression is permissible) a group formation with two members. Hypnosis is not a good object for comparison with a group formation, because it is truer to say that it is identical with it." (*ibid.* 116).

The shift from analogy to identity seems unnecessary and even strange, until it becomes clear that this shift serves the argument that there is an identity between the group and the individual. The components of this argument are scattered in different contexts within the space created by the text. I suggest that this fragmentation is not only evidence of the explicit structure of the text – where every component is explicated using a different psychoanalytic idea, but is also evidence of the quality and quantity of anxiety this argument deals with. The fragmentation of the argument regarding the identity existing between the individual and the group points to intense disintegrative anxiety, which cannot be contained by the argument, even after the transformation from analogy to identity; on the contrary – the anxiety is expressed in the fragmentation and scattering of the argument, which makes any critical review difficult and hides the logical laxness (Bion 1967). At the end, the hypnotic situation is presented as a group of two (Freud 1921: 128): "Hypnosis has a good claim to being described as a group of two", but actually it's a group of one, since the hypnotist – like the leader – is not considered a member of the group, and it is doubtful if he is essential to its existence" (ibid. 100). Freud is even ready to argue that there are two psychologies: one of the father – the leader, which is individual psychology, and another of the sons – the members of the group, which is group psychology. This particular twist in Freud's discussion is especially significant if one takes into account the importance Freud assigns to the premise of universality of human nature. Here he is slightly bending a crucial, fundamental premise – that there is only one psychology and it is universal – so he can argue that the individual and the group are one and the same. When Freud uses a reduction of the group to the individual, he is trying to disavow the threatening aspects of the group, to deny the disintegrative anxieties that are evoked and aroused in the individual when he is immersed in the group; then his argumentation becomes fragmented in its form and faulty in its logic.

I argue that the emotional tensions of the group in which Freud worked made his attempt to create an abstract conceptualization of group phenomena into a concrete action, a speech act in writing, intended to disavow group phenomena, and maybe even to expel the idea of the threatening group by means of the argument that the group is nothing but an enhanced individual, always already familiar and known.

Maybe Freud wouldn't have used reduction as a defence against anxiety aroused by group phenomena if he was writing within a context devoid of the emotional tensions of the group; but under such circumstances, Freud might not have been interested in group phenomena at all.

In other social writings Freud argues the reduction of the group to an individual using a biological/evolutionary perspective, composed of two suppositions, which enable him to move his focus from the individual to the group and vice versa, while he is arguing his case in favor of reduction:

The first supposition is that ontogenesis repeats phylogenesis, that is, the development of each individual repeats the evolution of the species; hence, assuming that the individual is identical to the group, the development of every man reconstructs the evolution of mankind (see for example – 1930: 139-140).

The second supposition is that acquired characteristics can be inherited. Freud insists on this Lamarckian position since it is crucial to his argument that group experiences are hereditary and are imprinted in each individual of future generations. Freud argues that when ontogenesis repeats phylogenesis, it is not only a repetition of biological evolution, but also of psychological evolution – acquired characteristics and memory traces of historical events were inherited and reappear in the psychological development of each individual (see for example – 1939: 99-100).

In the imagination of the reader a space is created, delineated by these two suppositions, within which it is possible to locate any and every social and historical phenomena. Such an organization of the space in the text creates a hologram-like effect, since the internal organization of every detail is identical to the internal organization of the whole. The reader's gaze is moving back and forth between the detail and the whole, and always encounters the same image.

So, what are the memory traces of historical events that are inherited and reappear in the ontogenetic development of the individual? Freud's phylogenetic fantasy first appears in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), in the interpretation of the totem meal as a ritualistic repetition of a real event. There Freud describes how the sons/brothers, facing expulsion from the herd, united in order to kill and eat the primal father. United, says Freud, they dared do what none of them dared do on his own. Freud

stresses that since the sons were cannibalistic savages, they ate whom they killed. The primal father aroused fear and envy in every one of the brothers; by eating him they identified with him, and each of them received a part of his power. The totem meal, concludes Freud, is a ritual repetition intended for remembrance of this act, which constituted society, culture and religion (1913: 141-142). The guilt caused by the murder of the primal father formed the two basic taboos of totemism: the prohibition on incest – in the form of banning marriage inside the totem, and the prohibition on murder – in the form of banning the killing of the totem animal which represents the father; these prohibitions are corresponding to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex (*ibid.* 143).

Freud concentrates on the emotional tensions of the oedipal situation, so he does not differentiate between the taboo on murder and the taboo on cannibalism, which is associated with primitive oral drives directed to the mother's breast. Since Freud's phylogenetic fantasy leads him to focus on the enactment of emotional tensions embedded in the oedipal situation and driven by sexual desire and murderous rivalry, he does not discuss the early development prior to the oedipal situation.

Gay (1988: 333-334) argues that ironically the historical actuality of the murder of the primal father is not necessary to Freud's argument; the universality of the oedipal situation is more than enough to explain both the guilt and the taboo. Gay is of the opinion that Freud's insistence on the historical actuality of the patricide as well as the obvious absence of the mother from the phylogenetic fantasy expresses his wrestling with Jacob Freud on the one hand, and his stubborn avoidance of dealing with his feelings towards Amelia Freud on the other hand.

In my opinion, beyond these roots in Freud's psychology, the absence of the mother from the phylogenetic fantasy is salient and significant for understanding Freud's reduction. Examination of the scattered references to the mother in various versions of phylogenetic fantasy points to the reduction as a solution to the problem of the presence of the mother, especially her symbolic presence. While the leader in the group invokes fantasies linked to the relation to the father, the group itself symbolizes the mother's body, containing all objects inside and arousing intense anxiety associated to primitive unconscious phantasies (Bion 1961: 162).

Freud's opening statement that individual psychology includes group psychology, stands in contrast to the intuitive perception that the group contains the individual. This intuitive perception is linked to the unconscious phantasy of the group as symbolizing the body of the phallic mother, containing within her all objects – the father as well as the baby. Freud's phallic position is a defense against the infantile dependence on the threatening figure of the mother; this defense necessarily leads to a phylogenetic fantasy from which the mother is absent while the primal father is present as a narcissistic and manipulative figure. Freud splits between the group and the leader by using the idea that once there was a man that did not develop as a human being and never needed others (Freud 1921: 123). Such an idea is reasonable only when ignoring human development by ignoring the mother, and in a similar vein – ignoring the group.

Hence, in the phylogenetic phantasy Freud splits the primal herd into group/family and leader/father (*ibid.* 123). Just as in the family the significant individual is the father, so in the group the significant individual is the leader; and while in the family the mother is hidden from his view, so the group symbolizing the mother is not revealed, and is not an object for observation. The reduction of the group to an individual enables Freud to disavow these anxieties, which are aroused in him as he unconsciously identifies the group with the mother's body.

But splitting is not enough; the measure needed is the expulsion of the group/mother and the design of an image of the leader/father that will fill the void left by the absent mother. Expelling the group/mother from consciousness is expressed in her exclusion from Freud's discourse in his social writings, and in exchanging the many with the single individual, exchanging the group with the leader.

Bion (1961) argued that participation in the group arouses primitive phantasies, identifying the group with mother's body containing all objects, and there is no way to avoid the anxiety evoked by any attempt to investigate and to interpret these phantasies, which unconsciously determine the experience of the individual in the group. Bion (*ibid.* 166-167) discusses the psychoanalytic movement as a group dealing with these intense anxieties, and analyzes Freud's views on the subject as a

function of his location in the psychoanalytic group. Bion argues that Freud's discussion of group psychology is limited by a blind spot, caused by the inherent presence of basic assumption pairing in the psychoanalytic inquiry. Basic assumption pairing describes the mentality prevalent in a group acting on the assumption that it needs to create a couple that will beget a messianic leader – a person or an idea that will save the group from feelings of hatred and despair. Basic assumption pairing dominates the psychoanalytic inquiry since psychoanalysis as a method of inquiry depends on a dialogue between two persons.

Bion suggests that although Freud "expressly disavowed any but a superficial study of the group problem... in fact [Freud] had ample experience of the group and what it means to be an individual caught up in its emotional stresses" (*ibid.* 167). Since Freud was an individual caught up in the group's emotional stresses, his ability to understand the group was limited by his participation in the psychoanalytic group, which encourages the domination of basic assumption pairing.

So, in Bion's opinion, how does the blind spot influence Freud's approach to groups? On the one hand, Bion argues that although Freud discusses the church and the army, he does not discuss the aristocracy, which – like the psychoanalytic movement – is also a specialized work group dealing with basic assumption pairing; hence, the blind spot hides from Freud's view the meaning of the group in which he participates. When Freud is observing groups, he sees only the groups different from the group he participates in – the church and the army.

On the other hand, because Freud is participating in this type of group, he refers to the situation in any group by means of what he learned about transference in the psychoanalytic situation (*ibid.* 105-106), and sees the cohesiveness of the group as stemming from libidinal ties; hence, the blind spot causes Freud to see in every group the group he participates in. when Freud looks at other groups, he sees only the familiar pattern of the group he participates in.

Following Bion I suggest another reflection on Freud's conceptualization of groups, claiming that it was influenced by his experiences in different groups in the psychoanalytic movement, and from his understanding – limited by his affiliation to

those groups and inspired by his fantasies and wishes as a member in the secret committee.

In the spring of 1912, when the rift between Freud and Jung was already a fact but uncertainty remained as to how the schism would take effect, the secret committee was created in order to protect Freud and psychoanalysis from enemies from within and without. In the first committee meeting in May 1913, Freud presented each member with an antique seal, which was then mounted on a gold ring; for years Freud himself wore a ring bearing the head of Jupiter. In the beginning the committee included five members – Ernest Jones, Karl Abraham, Hanns Sachs, Sandor Ferenczi and Otto Rank; after WWI Max Eitingon was added to the committee.

At the same period, Freud found himself involved in several complicated triangular situations. In 1909 Jung wrote to Freud about a love affair with a patient, Sabina Spielrein; later she joined the Viennese psychoanalytic society, and in spring 1912 she asked Freud to accept her for analysis the following year; Freud agreed, but when she became pregnant he suggested she will not begin analysis. In 1912 Freud also agreed to Ferenczi's request to accept for analysis Elma Palos, the daughter of Gizella Palos, Ferenczi's married lover – because Ferenczi fell in love with Elma while she was in analysis with him. Roughly at the same time Freud agreed to Jones's request to accept for analysis his lover, Loe Kann. In Freud's correspondence with Ferenczi and Jones, both analyses are discussed, as well as the analysis of Jones with Ferenczi, which Freud instigated at the spring of 1913.

In 1913 Freud completed *Totem and Taboo*, in which he claimed that the origin of culture is rooted in what later became known as the "just-so story" (Gay 1988: 327), or the phylogenetic phantasy. In her book on the history of the secret committee, Grosskurth (1991: 59) argues that Freud wanted to defeat Jung at his own game – mythology, and to suggest by means of the oedipal situation his own interpretation to the dawn of human history; the "just-so story" was to stand in contrast to Jung's elaborate interpretative efforts to expel the ghost of sexuality, reappearing by means of the prohibition on incest. Following Freud's request the committee members read the proofs of *Totem and Taboo*. The reactions were mixed: Jones wondered why Freud thinks the event actually occurred in the past, and dared to suggest that this

argument points to "an unusual personal significance for you"; Freud ignored politely Jones' criticism. Ferenczi, however, asked Freud not to change anything (*ibid.* 60); he also suggested that this work by Freud is the totem meal, in which Freud takes up the role of the Mitras priest who kills the father [that is, kills the totem animal that symbolizes the father], while his disciples are the audience to the "holy spectacle". Jones and Ferenczi traveled from Budapest to Vienna and joined Sachs and Rank on June 30, 1913 for "a festive 'totemic' dinner" during which Loe Kann presented Freud with an Egyptian figurine, which Freud adopted as his official totem (Grosskurth 1991: 60). I argue that Freud's insistence on the historical reality of the phylogenetic fantasy originated in his impressions from these triangular situations, which offered meaning devised in the familiar oedipal pattern to the intense emotional tensions Freud sensed in the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in particular, and in the international psychoanalytic movement in general, because he was the primal father of the psychoanalytic herd.

In *Totem and Taboo* Freud creates a theory that arises from his experience as a leader. Grosskurth interprets the symbolic meaning of the "just-so story" as regards to the individual – Freud the leader; hence she argues that because he was taking away the women, he expected murderous hostility from the men (*ibid.* 60): "By analyzing Elma Palos and Loe Kann, Freud was in effect taking the women away from his 'sons.' Hence Ferenczi and Jones and Jung all must subconsciously want to kill him". It seems that this interpretation offers a good explanation to the experience which influenced Freud's writing, but only if one ignores the fact that Freud, contrary to what was perhaps convenient for him to think and to write in the "just-so story" was not the only participant in the drama of these triangular situations. Except for Sabina Spilerein, who approached Freud herself requesting he accept her for analysis, the other women he was "taking away" from his "sons" were actually presented to him as an offering – Elma Palos was sent to Freud by Ferenczi, and was returned to sender; after Loe Kann was presented to Freud as an offering from Jones, she presented the offering of the totem to Freud.

I suggest that Freud's insistence on interpreting group tensions according to the emotional tensions inherent in the oedipal situation stemmed from "the numbing feeling of reality" typical to the experience of projective identification in a group,

which made Freud feel that he is "a particular kind of person in a particular emotional situation" (Bion 1961: 149), and led him to create a fantasy about a particular person, an omnipotent and omniscient primal father, in a particular emotional situation – the moment in which totem and taboo were created.

I argue that Freud wrote the psychoanalytic mythology of the primal herd under the influence of his own experience in the primal psychoanalytic herd – the Viennese group in which he felt frustrated, helpless and dependent on a group saturated with the emotional tensions of both dependency and aggression (Andreas-Salome 1964: 12-13; Eisold 1996; Nunberg & Federn 1965: 465fn.; Roazen 1969: 46; Sachs 1945: 59).

In the Viennese group, the dependency expressed in the competition for Freud's favor, as well as the aggression expressed in the competition with Freud, left him with a sense of failure regarding his leadership of this group (1914: 25). He therefore tried to dilute the tensions by founding the International Psychoanalytic Association. The success of this maneuver led to a series of schisms – with Adler, with Stekel, with Jung – a typical defence in a pairing group (Bion 1961: 127-128).

The triangular situations offered Freud an opportunity to explore the influence of dependency and aggression; and yet, in the triangular situations – not as in the psychoanalytic movement – Freud could think about these in the context of the oedipal situation: the series of schisms appears in Freud's description of the sons' rebellion against the father, and Freud's experience as a leader appears in the description of the primal father. As for the totem meal, it seems that Freud felt the rebels were feeding off him. Roazen mentions a bitter comment Freud made: "In later years Freud frequently maintained that his students were 'like dogs. They take a bone from the table, and chew it independently in the corner. But it is my bone!'." (1969: 163).

Freud was accustomed to clinical induction, in which theory derives from praxis, or to be more specific – the conceptual understanding of the analysand derives from the emotional experience of the analyst. Freud was certain that the impressions and the anxieties he experienced in the relationship with the psychoanalytic herd – from the tensions in the triangular situations to the politics of the psychoanalytic movement –

indicate a real occurrence, and it seems that there was indeed a real occurrence – not at the dawn of humanity, but at the dawn of the psychoanalytic movement.

One may argue that it was more convenient for Freud to think and to write the figure of the primal father as one who does not need the herd, since Freud was painfully aware of the dependence he felt as regards the psychoanalytic movement; this dependence caused Freud extreme anxiety at the time of the schism with Jung, and was one of the determining factors in creating the secret committee.

The phylogenetic fantasy testifies more to Freud's experience than to what happened in the psychoanalytic movement – more to the imaginary register than the real register (Lacan, 1977). Freud's fascination with this fantasy influenced other interpretations of the history of the psychoanalytic movement. The fascination with this fantasy stems from the narrative it offers, the familiar story about the emotional tensions of the oedipal situation in the family, which spares those who follow Freud, as it spared Freud, from coping with the dread inherent in confronting the chaos of the basic group (Bion 1961: 165, 189). Freud's experience in the psychoanalytic movement points to, as Bion argues, "...a plethora of material familiar in a psycho-analysis, but still awaiting its evaluation in the situation of the group" (*ibid.* 151). What Freud sees as a murderous oedipal rebellion, is seen from the vertex of the group situation as a schism originating in the anxieties aroused in the pairing group around appointing Jung as a real successor to Freud.

So, when Freud thinks about the group, he cannot but think about the individual. *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* was published in August 1921, prior to the only vacation the secret committee shared (Grosskurth, 1991, 112-113). Freud's conceptualization of the identification structure of the group can be traced to his experience of the demands of members of the committee. The pressures he experienced made him grasp their powerful yearning for an authority figure, a yearning that constituted him as leader. Freud identified the tensions of rivalry over the favor of the leader, tensions that the structure of identification is meant to mitigate. Such an organized and organizing structure of identification suggested by Freud in this conceptualization expresses his wish to find a familiar order in the chaos of group phenomena. In my opinion, in forming this conceptualization Freud tried to

understand the stresses and the tensions imprisoning him; that is, he attempted to understand the psychological determination forcing him into a leadership role, and to formulate explicitly the implicit forces binding him to his position. Freud's conceptualization is not really close to the account about what happened in the committee. It is more akin to the discourse the committee members were engaged in while discussing their intentions and wishes in their relationship with Freud and amongst themselves. What Freud wanted to see in the secret committee blurred his vision of what was really happening. When Freud disavows group phenomena, and interprets it in the familiar pattern of the oedipal situation mitigated by the phylogenetic fantasy – he stays blind to the hidden forces that design the psychoanalytic movement.

The emotional tensions of experiences in the groups of the psychoanalytic movement influenced Freud's conceptualization. Acknowledging this influence enriches our understanding of Freud's insistence on the historical reality of the phylogenetic fantasy, as well as the understanding of Freud's reduction of the group to an individual – the leader. Contrary to many interpretations, which express covert or overt disappointment from Freud for not being omnipotent or omniscient in his role as leader, the perspective suggested above demonstrates that like any other individual in a group, Freud was caught up in the emotional tensions of the group, and did his best to survive the emotional violence inherent in them.

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