

**Emotional Pain in Learning:  
Applying Group-analytic Experience in Non-Clinical Fields**  
by **Brian Nichol**

Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd. from *Group Analysis* Vol. 30 (1997), 93-105

**Abstract**

*This paper considers the implications of emotional pain in learning and personal change. Such pain is a characteristic feature of the experiential group and one which therapists take for granted. Pain is also a feature of professional training and development in areas such as management and teaching, but one which is not acknowledged. A theory of emotions in learning and personal change in professional development would be helpful in applying group analysis to non-clinical fields.*

Pain in learning and personal growth is something which group analysts appear to take for granted, so much so that the literature has little or no discussion about the issue. Much is written about the individual components of pain in therapy, such as anxiety, shame and grief, but direct discussion of pain as an inevitable feature of learning and personal change does not appear to have been explored. I would suggest that the issue of emotional pain is central to the relationship of group analysis to education, and a factor limiting the wider use of the theory and technique of group analysis in fields other than psychotherapy and social work.

Group analysts have been interested in the non-clinical applications of group analysis for many years. S.H.Foulkes recognized the potential of group analysis as an educational method. He believed that a group analytic group for all people could make 'a desirable contribution to their education as responsible citizens, in particular of a free and democratic community' (Foulkes and Lewis, 1944)

Subsequently other writers described their experiences. Abercrombie (1969) applied group analysis in higher education, Rance (1989: 333-337) wrote about group analysis in organizations, Garland (1983: 198-202) applied it as a consultant in a school setting and Mhlongo (1983: 192-197) in consulting to social work staff groups. Nevertheless, my sense is that group analysts have not yet realized the potential of group analysis in these fields.

One area where group analysis has developed an exceptional level of expertise is in the training and development of group analysts. Although group analysis in this context is closely bound up with group analysis as group therapy, that may miss the point that group analysts now have a considerable expertise in professional training and development in general.

I have a specialist interest in human relations skill training for managers and school teachers. In 1981 I attended a Group Analytic Society (London) Introductory Course and subsequently continued to train and practice as a group therapist. Apart from developing a certain competence as a group therapist I was struck by how much I learned about the learning processes of professional training and development. However, it seems to me that the idea of emotional pain is an anathema to many educators who are working in these fields.

Both management and teaching require trainees to develop interpersonal and group work skills, and group analysis is a powerful method for developing these skills of human relationships. In my own department I developed courses for management trainers, adult educators and trainee school teachers based on the group analytic model of a seminar run in tandem with an experiential group. These courses attracted few participants and of those trainees that joined the programme many were highly defended against the feelings stimulated in the experiential group. This was in marked contrast to the trainee group analysts on the advanced courses who valued the space and time offered by the therapy group.

Why should managers and teachers not respond to the opportunity of an experiential group? Clearly there are a number of factors besides a basic wish to avoid pain, including the individual's sense of trust, the institutional culture and the relationships that exist prior to the course. I suggest that part of the answer is that these professionals have a limited theory of the nature and significance of emotions in learning and development, of painful affect in particular. We need to develop an argument that it is normal for professionals to experience distress at points in the process of training and development, and that there is value in working with these feelings directly rather than denying or repressing them.

Group analysts understand the nature of anxiety and distress in therapy. They also have a good deal of expertise in using group analysis in the training of professionals in group work. This is a good position from which to develop a theory of emotions in learning for educators and trainers who are in need of many of the same skills.

In an unpublished thesis (Nichol, 1992) I reported on why psychotherapists in training thought that pain is a part of learning and growth. With regard to other professionals I argue here that there is an important place for group analysis in helping trainees integrate the emotional and intellectual dimensions of their training.

### **Pain in Learning to Become a Group Psychotherapist**

My main research was a participant observation study of learning to become a group psychotherapist. I developed case studies of my own experiences and used my observations as the basis of a survey of 19 others who had been through training, based on interviews designed to explore the significance and meaning of the experiential group. Reports of pain and distress were commonplace. Significantly, although these were disturbing and upsetting the therapists valued the experiences for their learning and development.

The following examples from the research data illustrate the nature of what I am naming as 'pain' in the trainee's experience of learning to become a group therapist. They are a small sample of all the episodes the interviewees reported and have been selected to indicate the range of painful affect. It is important to note that, with one exception, the episodes come from experiential groups which were part of training courses and not therapy groups. Group analysts are more likely to use experiential groups than therapy groups in the training of other professionals.

### ***Painful experiences of anger in the group***

A classical episode in many groups is the anger expressed in the early stages of the group forming. Initial reactions are often one of surprise and puzzlement at the behaviour of the group conductor and the absence of an agenda. Often group members express their anger towards the conductor whom they feel to be failing them. Jenny reported this from her first experiential group in the marriage guidance training at the Rugby centre.

The tutor entered the room.

[He] sat down and said absolutely nothing. It was a horrendous experience because we just did not know what was going on. If I remember, one or two people began to get a bit angry. There was a lot of pressure on the group leader to explain what the rules were.'

The tutor did say such things as: 'I wonder what is going on in the group at the moment?' which 'just fanned the flames of the anger, this rage'. After the session 'all hell broke loose as we sat there saying this was bloody awful and what did they think they were doing. We sat up drinking coffee getting ourselves wound up into this rage, working out how we were going to deal with this tutor if she came back to lead another of these groups.'

As the group developed however the members came to appreciate and make sense of the experience. The conflict was resolved and by the end of the weekend, after three experiential groups a day; everything was wonderful, everybody ended up loving each other, we had sorted out all our differences and our tutor had gone from being the pits of the earth to wonderful.'

### **Participants experience pain coming from their daily lives**

Peter suffered a personal crisis and he used his time in the group in coming to terms with his new situation,

I was struggling with a medical condition which not only affected me physically but because it is hereditary, might also affect my children. ... This all erupted in the middle of that group and there was a lot of support and concern for me. There was nowhere else for that. I was in tears a lot of the time.

Alison talked in her group about her unhappy marriage. She was trying to screw up the courage to leave her husband but finding it very stressful.

There were times when I wept in the group, times when I was distressed, but overall I saw it as very positive and supportive. It was painful taking all this painful material to the group.

### **The prospect of self-disclosure brings anxiety**

Speaking about yourself in a group is not always easy but Matthew believed that the individual needs to find the courage to do so.

There is no way you can shirk things, that is the important thing. In the sense you go to a session which leads you to think. But then there is the next session, so you can not let it go. You go further and further into your thoughts and fantasies in a way I had never anticipated at the beginning.

.... you cannot shrug things off and they have to be faced. .... You get up the strength to talk about them in the group.

### **Losing control of emotions**

Laura attended a residential workshop and was surprised how deeply it affected her. Her father had died three years previously and the group activated her feelings of grief and loss.

He had died in January and the group began in January and there was some one there who was ill. I did not realize what connections I was making [as the group developed] and also I had not realized how much unresolved grief I had about the death of my father, and so I practically swam in tears. And I remember feeling ashamed of that, as though, expecting to be rejected, really. ... Although it was horrendous experience and needed a lot of digesting after the course ended I thought on the whole it was very important.

### **Individuals become painfully aware of aspects of themselves**

What people learn about themselves in the group is not always pleasant and that in itself is painful, as these extracts illustrate. Peter said,

One of the issues was finding myself search for a comfortable pair in the group, on the grounds that if you can find someone to pair with it is safer. This particular woman used a very poignant word to describe what she felt for me, which set up an echo in me. Also, finding her physically attractive and wanting to become more involved with her in the group. But becoming aware that for me it was a flight to find a mother and also - frighteningly - a mother who was sexually attractive and offered more than comfort.

Anna's case illustrates the distress people can experience when faced with an aspect of their character which has been denied:

[The group was] traumatic for me in that it put me in touch with my destructiveness, my potential to be destructive and to undermine, and to gain a false sense of security through [manipulation]. ... That insight was quite traumatic. ... It was awful to see myself in that way because I had moved through quite a range of feelings [in the group], from omnipotence initially to understanding how destructive I was being ... towards the facilitator ... When I began to apply it to my life and spot it in other areas. I did not like that part of myself at all.

### **Groups 'open you up'**

In these episodes it is evident that the distress has its origin within the individual, and there is a sense of the individual working with the material of his or her own volition. This is a contrary perspective to the anxiety of educationalists that these groups inflict damage. The therapists, however, did draw attention

to the way the group can appear to initiate pain in the individual. Groups can, in a certain sense, 'open you up'. Eva explained:

Until I started getting involved there were a lot of blocked off areas of my life, like, "That doesn't hurt me any more", "That doesn't matter". Insecurities which you cover up. The course opened these areas to reveal gaping wounds which needed attention. Issues got opened up. I got in touch with feelings and memories. Things about myself which I did not feel comfortable about. Hurts which I could not push back under the carpet at the end of the course.

### **Work and working through**

The interviews suggested a more sustained developmental process for some individuals, which Matthew called 'working through'. The following example throws light on why trainees find it important to work with painful feelings. The episode Matthew related came from a twice-weekly therapy group rather than an experiential group.

In his childhood his mother had been a dominating person. At first he was puzzled that he found this to be a difficult issue to speak about in the group but as he followed the story through in all its ramifications it became apparent that it was bound up with a sense of deep shame.

I remember talking about being stopped from going on a weekend with [a school club] because of my mother's fear of my getting pneumonia - which was one of her obsessions..

... the thing was, I was angry with what my mother had done and ashamed of the dependency which was involved in it. It actually seemed to be in some way dirty and I am sure by that I meant there was something sexual about it, at some level, and I am sure there was. Because there was another thing. ... my father was on night shift. When I was six, seven, eight, nine, ten! I used to sleep in my mother's bed. I thought there was nothing to this, just convenient; I got lonely at night. But I think it had left traces - not traces, considerable amounts - which were to do with sexuality. And there were consequences to this.

I think what also came through was anger about it as well. Having slept in the same bed as your mother, and also the dependency and not wanting to upset your mother as a result. No...I have got this thing about upsetting people. And that needed all working through in a group. And also upsetting women. Needing to see my mother as an ideal figure and not acknowledge the anger. Because the anger was unsafe. Because if you are with someone closely, you cannot afford to get angry about it. And also to accept that women can get angry and I suppose my mother's relation to her husband and all this kind of stuff. That why it needed working through.

'Working through' is following these lines and traces and connections, which spin out from a central focus, towards some resolution of the tensions associated with the issue which eventually yields insight into the self in relationships.

## **Characterizing the Pain**

The reports help us to characterize the 'pain' associated with learning through an experiential group. By 'pain' I mean; the furious feelings of participants in Jenny's group; Peter's fear, anger and grief when he told the group of his medical condition; Alison's tears over her unhappy marriage; the common anxiety of finding the courage to speak about a troubling aspect of our experience; losing control when a conjunction of factors precipitates the emotion, as with Laura's grief; the shock of facing up to a repressed aspect of the self as in the case of Peter's sexuality and Anna's remorse at her violent attack on the conductor; Eva's raw sense of being 'opened up': and Matthew's working through his intense feelings of shame in his relationship with his mother

Pain associated with the experiential group involves the powerful emotions of; anger, fear, grief, hurt, anxiety, shame, shock and remorse. A group analyst in training will inevitably meet and need to work with these emotions.

In the training of group analysts there is a tendency to view the emotions associated with learning to be largely bundled up with the processes of the trainee's therapy. It is as if working with distressing emotions is therapy and somehow separate from the learning processes in the trainee's professional development. However, if we reflect about where and when distressing emotions arise in training we find them to be ubiquitous. It seems wrong to gather up all feelings and label them "For Therapy". To do so diminishes the significance of feelings in human relationships and colludes with a dominant ideology in organisations which wishes to label anything to do with emotions as therapy.

## **Why Do Therapists Open Themselves to Painful Processes?**

I asked the interviewees, 'How they explained the need to go through all this pain in their professional training?'.

For Len much of this was the individual facing up to the split-off parts of the Self. His explanation was that 'facing this pain and surviving, leads to a new perspective'. The individual discovered that things which were painful were often shared by others, which gave rise to a common experience of not being alone. He spoke of these episodes as being part of the process of developing intimacy with another person and within the group. Eva believed the distress was inevitable in training. The pain for the therapist arose from facing up to issues and internal conflicts which she had previously been defended against. Alison justified the process of understanding her own psychological processes in terms of preventing her own problems becoming entangled with those of the client. She appreciated the benefits of therapy in personal terms quite separate from her professional role. Jenny was going to attend a group-analytic workshop a few weeks after our interview and she anticipated that it would be painful for her. She explained:

I know I am going to survive it and the end of it it is going to be worthwhile. I am going to get something out of it. So that the pain is part of the process of growth and change that I am going to get out of the weekend.

Pain is not an end in itself but rather an experience which is associated with the process of change. Shirley dismissed her crying in group sessions as if brushing away flies, the tears were 'irrelevant'. She cannot talk about things which matter deeply to her without the odd tear or, indeed, lots of tears.

Group therapists regard their feelings as an instrument in their therapeutic work. Feelings are the essence of empathy. Their sensitivity to the currents of feelings within the therapy group is an important source of information about the group situation in its manifest and latent form. Feelings are the vital part of countertransference.

Managers and other professionals reading the previous sections might find the episodes alien to their ideas of professional development. The implication that pain might be an important aspect of human learning can be denied by categorizing the episodes as 'therapy' - an activity which is separate and different from the learning and development in management or teacher education programmes. However, in the group-analytic training these experiences were an important part of the experiential group which was central to learning in the trainees' professional development.

### **Group Analysis in the Training of Other Professionals**

In this research the training of group therapists was observed from the viewpoint of professional development. It is evident that the therapists in training expect to learn and change. That it is painful is something of a side issue. The therapists all accepted that pain and distress is an inevitable part of the process of personal change. However, if we are interested in using group analysis in other areas, pain associated with the experiential group is a real barrier. We need to think through how we deal with this if we are to use our methods in other fields of training.

For the sake of clarity in considering the the approach of group analysis as a training method for other professionals I focus on managers and management training. The rôle of manager has many similarities with group psychotherapists. How they manage human relationships and group dynamics are factors in how effective individuals are in these rôles. Managers need to learn about human relationships and group work, and as we know, a group-analytic experiential group is an effective method for such learning.

The aims of a group are to help participants to learn about themselves, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. In the supportive context of the group they can get feedback from other participants. They can observe the relationships between other members and fit these observations to the social and psychological concepts that they studied in other parts of the training programme. An experiential group enables trainees to study aspects of human relationships and groups which are awkward to explore in any elsewhere. It is difficult to explore psychological phenomena, such as transference and defence mechanisms, and group phenomena, such as group culture and the developmental phases of groups, with role play and structured exercises. However, people who have not entered the life-world of the group analytic workshop but who inhabit the life-world of the commercial or industrial organization have a different attitude towards the emotions in learning experiences. The display of feelings is often regarded as showing weakness of character. The dominant ideology in organisational life is that emotions are inconvenient and should be repressed. A consequence of this ideology is that the idea of

deliberately working with emotions in training is alien to many people. This ideology is a significant factor in limiting the diffusion of group analysis into other fields.

I recently visited a prestigious management training centre. One of its principle programmes involves a good deal of work in small groups and the participants complete a set of psychometric tests designed to give them information about their leadership characteristics. In an individual interview staff members give each manager feedback from these tests. At lunch I broached the question of distress in management training. Could not the data from these psychometric tests be unsettling to the managers? (The term a 'battery of tests' took on a new meaning.) Did my host not think that the resource of therapy might be valuable to managers to support them in assimilating this new picture of themselves? My host's immediate response was that their programmes did not involve any 'therapy'. However, his colleague disagreed. He said he often found himself involved in counselling with individuals. The managers wanted to use their individual sessions with him to talk about personal issues which had been stimulated through the training programme. This illustrates a dilemma for management training for there is something approaching a taboo in talking about the distress associated with management learning. Consequently the disturbing material and emotions are processed (more or less satisfactorily) on the margins or in the spaces of management training programmes.

In the 1970s the T-group enjoyed a period of popularity as a method for training managers. T-groups worked with the emotions of the group members and this was a factor in the subsequent rejection of T-groups by organizations. Stories circulated about managers 'breaking down' in the groups, which fostered alarm. The direct expression of emotion in a training workshop was inexplicable to many of the senior managers who signed the cheque for the workshop fees.

However, emotion in management learning is returning to the management training agenda. Vince and Martin (1993: 205-215) wrote critically about the absence of a theory of emotions in 'action-learning' - a popular approach to management training developed by Revans (1983). Action learning places the emphasis on learning from experience. A manager in training is given responsibility for a significant management project and placed with other trainees in small groups called 'learning sets'. The set is regarded mainly as a problem-solving group to support the trainees' projects. The set is similar to the peer supervision group in group analytic training, but the set facilitator's rôle does not appear to be as important as that of the supervisor. There is no equivalent of a therapy or an experiential group in the action learning training programme, although it would seem the set provides psychological support in the way of a self-help group. In fact, Revans was scathing about the use of experiential groups in management training,

... exercises such as sensitivity training, non-directive counselling and other excursions into group psychotherapy are but rarely anchored to the here and now demands of business. (Revans, 1983, quoted in Vince and Martin, 1993)

Vince and Martin found Revans' overly rational perspective a handicap in working with the emotions of learning and personal change. They argue that the emphasis on rationality denies the significance of emotions and, in doing so, colludes with the political status quo of organizational life. Their own project



is to find 'a way of describing and working with action learning process which honours both the psychological and political processes that seem to be taking place inside action learning.' (1993:205) The action-learning model as it stands does not consider the issue of resistance to learning: the assumption is that emotions are managed separately. They argue that there is a need to supplement the model with a theory of emotions in management learning and they put forward their suggestion, which is essentially a useful reformulation of the function of ego defence mechanisms in learning and growth.

### **The Dilemma**

I have reported research which suggests that emotional pain is a significant feature of learning to become a group psychotherapist. By extrapolation I suggest that it is also a feature of management learning, but one which is not acknowledged. Managers' effectiveness depends on relationships and their competence in working with groups. They need to learn similar concepts, attitudes and skills to those of a group therapist but the training of a group therapist requires unlearning and a reappraisal of the Self. The story from the management training centre is a case example. Vince and Martin argue for a theory of emotions in management training. I have described how an experiential group could be helpful. There is, however, a dilemma for group analysts offering their expertise.

Emotions are at the heart of the group analytic experiential group. The experiential group is the principle medium for communicating group analytic theory and practice. However, pain in the sense of negative affect (anger, grief, hurt, shame, fear, anxiety, and so on.) is an inevitable part of the process of any group-analytic experiential group which develops beyond a superficial level of communication. If the trainees want the benefits that will flow from the learning they will need to work with the associated distress. The dilemma is that a group analyst cannot conduct a group in which significant learning occurs without the associated negative affect.

Do group analysts acknowledge that learning and growth for a manager is likely to be painful and that it would be useful to build into programmes opportunities for trainees to work with the feelings stimulated in the course of their training? Would we go as far as to argue that managers need the element of therapy in their training programmes? Or should we be judiciously vague and offer an experiential group? It is then left to the conductor and the participants to negotiate the level of communication or therapy they want to work with after the group has started. Perhaps such a Trojan-horse tactic is the best way to deal with the irrationality that surrounds the issue of 'education or therapy'? An alternative is to think through the issue and develop a theory of emotions in learning for group therapists and other professional groups. My proposition is that it would be healthier and more constructive for all concerned if emotional pain in learning and growth were acknowledged as normal and legitimate, and that teaching/learning/therapeutic strategies were developed to work with emotions of learning in a constructive way rather than leaving the making sense of the experience to the vagaries of the informal system. If such a theory were articulated it would help the work of applying group analysis in other fields.

### **References**

Abercrombie, M.L.J. (1969) *The Anatomy of Judgment*, Harmondsworth:Penguin.

Foulkes S.H. and Lewis E. (1944) 'Group Analysis: Studies in the Treatment of Groups on Psycho-Analytic Lines', *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 20: 175-84.

Garland, C., (1983) 'A Group Analytic Approach in a Comprehensive School', *Group Analysis* 16 (3):198-202.

Mhlongo,A. (1983) 'The Group Analyst as Consultant in Social Services Setting', *Group Analysis* 16 (3): 192-197.

Nichol, J.B., (1992) 'Learning to Become a Group Psychotherapist: with Special Reference to Group Analysis', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester.

Rance, C., (1989) 'What has Group Analysis to Offer in the Context of Organisational Consultancy', *Group Analysis* 22 (3): 333-337.

Revans, R. (1983) *The ABC of Action Learning*, Bromley, Kent:Chartwell-Bratt.

Vince, R. and Martin, L., (1993) 'Inside Action Learning: An Exploration of the Psychology and Politics of the Action Learning Model', *Management Education and Development*, 24 (3): 205-215.

Reprinted by permission of Sage Publications Ltd. from *Group Analysis* Vol. 30 (1997), 93-105