Liminal Space and Transformative Change in Group Training in Guatemala: A Group Analytic Perspective[1]

Espacio fronterizo y Cambio Transformativo en el Entrenamiento de Grupo en Guatemala: una Perspectiva Grupo Analítica

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Abstract

This paper was given as a keynote lecture at the Second African Regional Conference, 'Groups crossing boundaries: co-creating spaces for transformative change'. Giving this paper allowed me to explain some of my Guatemalan experiences and to demonstrate the potential of group analysis as a powerful tool of transformation for individuals as well as for groups, for organizations and for societies as well.

I describe a group analytic supervision training in a post-war society that turned out to be a challenge on a personal, theoretical and procedural level. Described is not only the political context of the training, but also difficulties and conflicts that arose in the training group, mirroring unconscious cultural defences and anxieties. Focusing on the group's disturbing transgression of boundaries it was finally possible to understand these acts as manifestations of a hidden psychosocial trauma in the group. On the basis of this slowly growing process of understanding, the group managed to open up for new theoretical perspectives and unknown methodological approaches.

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[1] Another version of this paper was published in Group Analysis 46(3) 2013.

Participants of the training finally dared to apply their newly acquired knowledge and capacities as supervisors in one of the most sensitive political institutions of the country, and as the evaluation showed, did so most successfully.

Resumen

Este documento fue impartido como una conferencia magistral en la Segunda Conferencia Regional de África: 'Grupos que cruzan fronteras: espacios de co-creación para un cambio transformador'. Dar este trabajo me permitió explicar algunas de mis experiencias en Guatemala y demostrar el potencial del grupo análisis como una poderosa herramienta de transformación tanto para los individuos como para los grupos, las organizaciones y también las sociedades.

Describo un grupo de entrenamiento - supervisión grupo analítico en una sociedad de post-guerra que resultó ser un reto a nivel personal, teórico y procedimental. Se describe no sólo el contexto político de la formación, sino también las dificultades y conflictos que surgieron en el grupo de entrenamiento, lo que refleja las defensas y ansiedades culturales inconscientes. Entendiendo las transgresiones como los límites perturbadores de los grupos fue finalmente posible entender estos actos como manifestaciones de un trauma psicosocial latente en el grupo. Sobre la base de este proceso de comprensión progresiva de desarrollo, el grupo se las arregló para abrir nuevas perspectivas teóricas y enfoques metodológicos desconocidos. Los participantes de la capacitación, al final se atrevieron a aplicar sus conocimientos y capacidades recién adquiridas como supervisores en una de las instituciones políticas más sensibles del país, y según la evaluación mostró, lo hicieron con mucho éxito.

Guatemala

I started to get engaged in Guatemala in 2000, only four years after the end of a 36 year devastating war, during which 200 000 people died, 45 000 disappeared, and 1 million became refugees. More than 600 massacres took place.

Even though a formal peace agreement ended military confrontation, the war continues to this day in disguise, on the streets and in the families. Guatemala has to be considered one of the poorest and most violent countries in Latin America. The legacy of the war is the continued contamination of the lives and institutions of all Guatemalans.

Two Truth Commissions left no doubt that genocide took place. But until today only a few of the known human rights violators have been prosecuted. Both of these Truth Commissions, one from the Catholic Church and one from the UN, were modelled according to the South African TRC and even though they attempted to deal with the horrible past and prepare society for a better future, it has to be stated, that their political impact was reduced to zero. The government did not allow publishing of the names of the perpetrators therefore no public reconciliation process or prosecutions take place. But the testimony of the survivors of human rights atrocities was finally collected into 12

volumes of a report and published. In contrast to the South African situation the government in Guatemala had not changed and since the perpetrators sat in the government and in the military, it was obvious that they would judge themselves. Just a few months ago the government stated publicly that there was no civil war, only an armed conflict.

Therefore the suffering and the despair, the sorrow and the grief of large parts of the population are blatantly denied. Society seems to be oblivious to the pain of the victims of war who are mostly of Mayan descent. As Volkan (2001) pointed out, under these circumstances, denying the past, means not being able to construct a future. Volkan has shown in his studies that if it is not possible to mourn the losses and to remember the past, you cannot overcome trauma. It continues and symptomatically manifests itself in the high incidence of crime, impunity, corruption, and widespread insecurity and it will be transmitted transgenerationally to the next generation. Working in Guatemala, therefore, means that one cannot avoid confrontation with trauma.

On my first visit to Guatemala in 2000 I met trauma in an Indian community: I was part of a group of international consultants who were evaluating possible ways to support the peace and reconciliation process in the country. We visited an organization of victims of war in a city known for some of the most horrifying massacres that had taken place during the war.

We were taken to a cemetery where one of our guides showed us the grave of his wife and his two small daughters who had been slaughtered by the army during a massacre in the village. He had painted flowers on the gravestone and built a monument, depicting in terrifying detail the tragedy, which only few of the villagers survived. He spoke to us unemotionally, while we cried silently.

Later on, as all the consultants gathered and talked on the veranda of the organization's office, I noticed some Indian women sitting next to us. I had not noticed them before. Mute and almost shadow-like, none of them had uttered a word since the beginning of our meeting. A woman next to me kept on lifting her arm in slow motion, trying to fend off a fly. The arm finally reached her face and then slowly, ever so slowly, sank back on her lap as if she were absolutely exhausted. She kept on repeating this gesture, till a little girl came running along, leaning on her knees, looking into her face, searching for her eyes. But the woman did not even seem to notice the girl; she did not embrace her or touch her, much less talk to her. After a while the girl ran away. These experiences, which I could not even name at that time as an expression of trauma, were the beginning of my emotional and professional engagement in Guatemala.

The question for us consultants now was, what could be done in Guatemala in a society were mass trauma had taken place that was officially denied but that showed in high incidents of crime and violence.

At the beginning of our consultations in Guatemala, we had considered the possibility of organizing psychotherapeutic support. But we soon realized that this would have been an impossible task: There were not enough psychologists to offer trauma-therapy in 22 different Mayan languages to the Indian population on the large scale needed. Therefore we had to think about alternatives.

Throughout our different visits to the country, we had met many professionals who were in desperate need of psychosocial support. Psychologists, social workers, medical doctors, psychiatrists and nurses had told us about their work, including efforts to:

1. Support Indian communities and families, who were awaiting exhumations of mass graves,
2. Counsel lawyers who defended torture victims and prisoners accused of man-slaughter,
3. Organize meetings of Indian widows who had experienced gang rape, Offer advice to Indian communities that were trying to bring a case of genocide to court,
4. Counsel refugees, who were returning from Mexico.

These professionals were left alone with their experience of injustice, poverty, sorrow, and pain; they had an overwhelming feeling of never doing enough. No doubt, they were in serious danger of secondary traumatization. We eventually developed the idea of capacity building for human rights activists. By training these professionals in group supervision, we hoped to provide them with supervisory skills and the ability to provide training to others in the field, thus creating a network of people who could offer supervision to colleagues, groups, teams, and organizations as they strove for democracy, peace and reconciliation.

This would only work, if the training would be conceived as a liminal experience!

"In anthropology, liminality (from the Latin word līmen, meaning 'a threshold') is (… an experience) of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in … rituals, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete. During a ritual's liminal stage, participants 'stand at the threshold' between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way, which the ritual establishes" (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liminality). The concept of liminality was first developed by the anthropologist Arnold

van Gennep (1909) and later taken up by Victor Turner (1969).

I would now like to describe some of these liminal experiences that occurred during the training. It took five years before we could initiate the first phase of our project in 2005. With the help of a very dedicated Guatemalan psychologist and friend, Dr. Vilma Duque, we started the training with 22 participants, mostly Guatemalan with a few foreign nationals. We planned 6 workshops in the course of 2 to 3 years, to be held in block-form, each workshop lasting 5 days. We offered this training again in 2009 and are about to start the third training in a few weeks.

The structure of the workshop was designed to include theory and learning exercises in the morning and life supervision every afternoon.

A. Theoretical Introduction
5. What is supervision and how does it work?
6. Historical developments of group theory and therapy
7. Essentials of Psychoanalysis and Group Analysis
8. Team Supervision and organization
9. Forms of intervention
10. Supervision and mediation - how to handle conflicts

B. Casework: Life Supervision
The focus was on casework and issues brought in for discussion by the participants. Case-based discussions were offered to explain psychological mechanisms and techniques.

C. Supervision of groups and teams:
Participants were expected to start with supervisory processes of their own after the first training.

D. Self-organized supervision groups:
Self-organized supervision groups worked occasionally, because controlled autonomous learning is not familiar in Guatemala.

E. Feedback by email:
Feed-back by email worked occasionally, but was not used as frequently as had been hoped for.

The Process of the Training

My first impression at the beginning of the training was that the participants were eager to learn and work with me. But invariably, unexpected difficulties disturbed our daily working routine:

The majority of the participants would arrive late in the morning, not just a few minutes, but sometimes half an hour, an hour or two hours. Some would not show up at all, or arrive the second or third day, or would leave in between, without announcing their absence. But then they would return and act as if nothing had happened.

Of course I was prepared to accept time flexibility. But this was far beyond any accepted cultural pattern of behaviour. But no matter, what I said, none of my interventions made any difference. With time, I started to understand what was happening. The frame of the workshop was continuously disrupted, mirroring the damages of a post-war society that had for decades known only fragmentation, annihilation, mistrust and the loss of all reliability. It seemed as if an echo of these destructive forces had reached our workshop, and were re-enacted in the here and now of the training. The dynamic of the workshop showed very clearly all signs of what Hopper called 'incohesion'. Hopper developed this theoretical concept in accordance with Bion's basic assumption model, conceiving a fourth basic assumption: 'Incohesion: aggregation and massification'. The experience in our training was over a long period of time, an experience of incohesion and more specifically of aggregation. It was not possible to create cohesion in the group, participants acted as individuals and showed no signs of attachment neither to each other, nor to me.

The fragile boundaries and the missing coherence in the group worried me constantly. I finally realized that this was an indication of counter-transference and a mirror of the group's basic matrix. My attempts to offer a protected space must have seemed like an illusion, maybe even a threat or betrayal. There simply was no trust anymore in society, or in groups or organizations, the war had destroyed all boundaries people ever knew and had believed in. I understood that the incohesion in the training was a symptom of trauma.

Added to these difficulties of keeping the boundaries, were strong cultural and social defences: During break time, participants would joke that the training was maybe just another way to colonize them, just another imperialist method to subjugate their hearts and minds. As facilitator I seemed to fit the image of a rich powerful white woman from Europe, somehow linked to the German Government, maybe a spy? I listened to these allegations, encouraging them to voice their doubts in the workshop whenever there was an opportunity.

Then, one day, a young and very softly speaking man attacked me rather aggressively: "Were there no Latin American authors to study? Why did they have to learn about Freud (1921), Lewin (1947), Balint (1957), Bion (1961), Foulkes (1948, 1964) and Cohn (1975)", he asked? Did these authors not adhere to quite individualistic and even bourgeois theories? Well, I agreed, maybe it seemed like that. I could see that they felt uncomfortable and uneasy, somehow overwhelmed by so many new theoretical approaches. Then, out of mere intuition, I explained that these authors were Jewish refugees from Germany, Hungary, and Austria, having fled after the rise of the Nazis. The group was startled. They wondered if the refugee experience of these psychoanalysts was reflected in their theoretical explorations. We scrutinized Freud's Mass and I-Analysis and Lewin's theoretical ideas about authoritarian, democratic and liberal rule. We asked what type of leadership was accepted in Guatemala. Could Freud help to explain why so many Guatemalan war victims gave their vote to a man who was known to be responsible for the worst human rights violations during the armed conflict? And could they think of situations or examples highlighting Foulkes perspective, that an individual in the group always mirrors an aspect of the whole group and that conflicts of one person tell us something about the hidden conflict in the whole group? It seemed as if I had finally found a key to the group and a key to introduce group theories. The participants began to open up for new approaches and eagerly picked up new ideas. They learned a lot and I learned as well.

Still, the boundaries kept on being an irritating issue. What really drove me to my limits was the continuous use of their mobile phones. One day I began to realize that I always addressed these issues in a reproachful manner. Things started to change slowly when I asked them what had happened that they could not come on time and why they had to leave in between the sessions of the workshop and why they always had to answer their phones. They now started to tell me about robberies on the way to the workshop, gangs entering the bus in the morning, manipulated car accidents, superiors not allowing them to leave the office, imminent lynchings in Indian communities, incidents that kept them on the phone for hours. When I finally was able to allow some space to talk about these experiences in our workshop, tension vanished and a more relaxed atmosphere started to develop. I could allow their lives and worries to enter the training and I guess, they felt recognized, because I finally could accept more of whatever they brought to the training.

I noticed that participants began to announce their planned absences ahead of time and I had the feeling that we finally were able to connect to each other and establish reliable working relationships. One of the participants even said one day with great emphasis that everybody was important in the group

and that she wanted everybody to be present at all times. There was really progress now and coherence could grow and incoherence vanished slowly. This showed especially in the cases offered for supervision. A young man, who had shown a lot of suspicion, summoned all his courage and talked about difficulties he encountered in his job. He said he felt ashamed to talk about his problems and to explore the reasons why he was not able to manage his project well. He had hired friends to run the project together with him but it was always he who ended up doing the reports. He hesitated to say that he felt abused but undoubtedly he felt disappointed and his sadness could be felt.

The group showed a lot of concern. This conflict was quite familiar to many of them. We struggled to unravel the situation and he began to understand that it was his aversion to authoritarian rule that kept him from taking up the role of the manager. Having previously learned about democratic rule, the group asked him if he would consider following its precepts in his work place. He was astonished at first but then very relieved. These were new perspectives to think about. He appreciated the richness of the ideas that had been offered to him and was very grateful. During break, we talked a bit and I could see that he was still moved by this earlier experience. Later on, I noticed that he had left the training and stayed away for two days and then came back and acted as if nothing had happened.

There had been understanding and compassion in the group, even a feeling of intimacy and trust. And then he left. He seemed like a refugee, leaving whenever a dangerous situation threatened his autonomy. During the war, departure was a life-saving strategy. Now it was like a reflex, an unconscious reaction of which he was not even aware.

Now I began to understand more of the difficulties in the training group: Trauma, I realized, was an issue in the group. There was an extreme fear of closeness and attachment because this experience reproduced memories of the war. Family members, friends and neighbours had disappeared and never came back and nobody ever knew why or what had happened. It was better and safer not to get attached, not to feel dependent and not to feel any desire to relate and communicate. Feeling close to other people was just too painful reminding one of all the losses endured in the past (Rohr 2012).

I realized that boundaries and reliability, anxieties and attachment were strong issues in this group. They were connected to the experience of trauma, which was re-enacted and reproduced in the training. But even though trauma could not be dealt with on a psychotherapeutic level, there was quite an impressive transformation taking place in the group. The training did work as a liminal space transforming the existing trauma in the group. How can this be explained?

Relying on Winnicott's (1953) concept of a transitional space, "where play can take place and be used to re-establish what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of" (Segun 2001), I would like to suggest that supervision is such a liminal and therefore transitional space. Participants are encouraged to explore social and institutional realities and their intrinsic influence on their professional activities. Whenever a conflict is described, the group is asked to take up the images and 'play' with them mentally and symbolically, using free-floating associations. An exciting verbal play might develop, deliberately crossing mental boundaries, exploring new thoughts and ideas, creating new perspectives. The original perception of the conflict slowly changes. Fixations are dissolved and a separation from the old and maybe antiquated perception allows a new vision to develop. The separation and integration processes are creative activities of the group, stimulating members to join the game and to play. This happens with restricted regression because there are peers and colleagues that play and it is the facilitator's responsibility to remind them that there is always a task that has to be accomplished.

In our training group, the participants rejected at first the idea of playing and getting acquainted with new theoretical approaches. They kept on hiding behind strong, cultural defences and transferences, suspicious of this unknown but supposedly safe and protected space, attacking boundaries and the concept of the training as well as my role as facilitator. When I introduced the stories of the refugee psychotherapists, an unexpected, intermediate space opened, bridging anxieties, so that they could leave their persecutory fantasies and open up for something new and unknown. This space included a more trustful relationship with the group and with me. After all, they realized that I had come from a country that represented one of the worst tragedies of mankind and I had brought the theories of Jewish refugees to them, obviously cherishing their ideas. A different and quite warm-hearted relationship began to grow and with it, reliability and trust. As a consequence the need to disrupt boundaries diminished and attachment tendencies and containment could be experienced (Rohr 2009).

The transformation that took place was not a linear process. It was always work in progress with all the difficulties, drawbacks and euphoric moments that escort change. Transformation was possible because there was recognition of their vulnerability, giving rise to hope and new and inspiring ideas. However the real challenge, that is switching from the role of trainee to that of supervisor, was still to come. Towards the end of the training one of the politically most sensitive and vulnerable organizations of the country asked for supervision. Thirteen of our candidates volunteered to start supervising 13 teams of this organization: a national archive.

This archive was discovered about 8 years ago by chance. It contains millions of secret documents about the so-called counter-insurgency operations by the police. It is an archive of the abyss of Guatemalan history, describing in detail and with meticulous handwriting the most cruel torture practices, naming and showing photos of thousands of people who were killed because of suspicion of collaborating with the guerrillas.

After the discovery of the archive, the Human Rights Procurator made sure that an organization was established to evaluate the documents. Two hundred young people were hired to work in the archive. They were eager to have this job because most of them were the children of mothers and fathers who had disappeared during the war. After years of silence and lies, they hoped to discover what had happened to their parents and they seemed to be reliable enough to be entrusted with this highly explosive material.

However, the political pressure placed on the organization was enormous: never-ending political attacks, an extremely heavy workload, miserable working conditions and the daily confrontation with the horror in these documents, created difficult working situations and numerous conflicts. Within the first few months, about 40 employees were dismissed or decided to leave. This was reason enough for the director to look for help from our supervisory support group.

Everyone in the organization was required to participate - from the cleaning women and the guards to the top level of the management. Once a month, on a Friday afternoon, buses would arrive and take 163 workers to a safe place such as a school or a monastery, where 13 supervisors were waiting for them. Thirteen teams were formed, working for 3 hours, 12 times a year.

At the end of this process, a written evaluation of the workers and interviews with the director and two of the workers complemented the findings of a two-day supervision workshop with the supervisors. The evaluation, as well as the interviews with the director and the workers indicated that many things had changed for the better in the organization:

1. Working conditions had improved
1. There were no longer mice, rats or bugs in the offices
2. Fungi had been eradicated from the documents
3. Protective clothing was available
4. Security trainings had taken place
5. Technical equipment had improved
6. Fluctuation of workers had diminished
7. There were fewer conflicts
8. Communication and cooperation in the teams had improved.

Workers said that they now felt like a family and organized parties on Friday evenings. There was less need for protest, even though conflicts still existed, but there were now different ways to express and solve them.

The supervisors described especially one situation that had been difficult to handle. The workers were complaining for months about the lack of toilet paper, the vermin infestations, mould between the rotten documents, clouds of dust, and the failure to provide protective clothing. They thought that nobody cared for them and felt alone, miserable, and unprotected. The supervisors felt a lot of empathy and solidarity with these young people, but they were also weary of listening to these unending complaints. Was that really supervision? They had serious doubts.

Finally, the workers came up with the idea that the supervisors should write letters to their superiors, explaining the complaints and requesting that something be done. The supervisors felt caught in a trap. They really wanted to help and show solidarity with the workers. In this situation, they remembered that I most certainly would insist on keeping to the rule of abstinence and maintain the boundaries, even if this meant having to bear doubts about one's political solidarity. They started to doubt whether abstinence and boundaries were always valid in Guatemala. After all, they wanted to be loyal to the working class and to the victims of the war! They struggled until they finally found a solution: They would talk about the letters in supervision but the workers themselves would have to write them.

This plan worked well. Letters were written and weekly meetings established and a new communicative culture was created. Within a year, the divisions between the workers and the superiors diminished without vanishing altogether and trust was partially restored. All this thanks to a protected space called supervision.

There was recognition of the fact that workers had gained autonomy and that the atmosphere in the organization had changed – even though there were drawbacks at times. Whenever the political pressure increased, established communicative structures in the organization broke down again. It was still a fragile attempt to introduce a less authoritarian style of rule, backed by a strong desire for more democracy within the organization.

A transformation had taken place because supervision had provided a liminal and transitional space that was safe enough to explore new creative ways to handle conflict. Instead of organizing protests on the courtyard, the workers wrote letters, talked to the management in open meetings, and organized parties. A huge step from action to reflection had taken place. Beyond the terror that surrounded them daily, there could be dancing and laughing as well.

This process was not without pain and not without ambivalence but at the end there was hope and a glimpse of a different, more democratic world, a world that they hoped would prevail one day throughout all of Guatemala.

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