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Two Perspectives on a Trauma in a Training Group: The Systems-Centred Approach and the Theory of Incohesion: Part I

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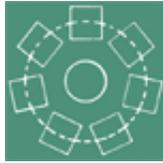The online version of this article can be found at:

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This paper considers some of the similarities and differences between the theory of living human systems and its systems-centred practice (Agazarian, 1997) and the theory of basic assumptions in general and of incohesion: aggregation/massification as a fourth basic assumption in particular (Hopper, 2003b). Part I of this paper summarises each theory and how they guide clinical practice. Part II presents a traumatogenic group event described retro-spectively by group members, and discusses this event from the two perspectives in the service of the clarification and development of each.

Key words: systems-centred training, (ba) I: A/M, theory of incohesion, theory of living human systems, trauma, aggregation, massification, roles, basic assumptions.

Part I of a two-part article. Part II is in the next issue of this journal.

Introduction
Along with Yvonne Agazarian, the authors of this paper were interested in exploring the potential for working together, and

in understanding more fully the similarities and differences in their respective theoretical and clinical approaches. Susan Gantt was working from the point of view of the theory of living humans systems (TLHS) and its systems-centred therapy and training (SCT) (Agazarian, 1997); and Earl Hopper from the point of view of his theory of the basic assumption of incohesion: aggregation/massification or (ba) I: A/M (Hopper, 2003b) as a development of the more general theory of basic assumptions (Bion, 1963). Therefore, Susan and Yvonne made a tentative plan with Earl for him to observe the more advanced of two SCT groups who were meeting concurrently as part of their three-day training event in London. Unfortunately, we failed to confirm our plans, and Susan, the leader of the SCT group that was to be observed, did not inform the group that Earl would be observing it. Thus, when Earl arrived the group was completely unprepared for this. Thus, quite unconsciously, unintentionally and regrettably, we precipitated a group trauma. Nonetheless, this offered us a chance to consider this traumatic experience from both of our theoretical and clinical perspectives.

To this end, we will first summarize the theory of living human systems (TLHS) and its systems-centred therapy and training (SCT), and the theory of the basic assumption of incohesion. We will then present the empirical illustration of a traumatogenic process within a social system: the unexpected group observation described retrospectively by the members of the group. This event and the processes that followed from it will then be discussed from each of the two theoretical perspectives, with particular attention to how the theory of incohesion deepens the SCT understanding of the intimacy phase dynamics, and the interventions that follow from this. We conclude with a recognition of the differences in the two approaches.

A Theory of Living Human Systems and its Systems-Centred Therapy

Systems-centred therapy and training (SCT) was developed from theory. Agazarian (1997) developed a theory of living human systems first and the SCT practice second. A theory of living human systems defines a hierarchy of isomorphic systems that are energy-organizing, goal-directed and self-correcting.

To understand hierarchy, picture three concentric circles. *Hierarchy* defines a system as always a set of three nested systems, with the middle system both existing in the context of another system, and as being the context for still another system. Thus, SCT says that systems come in threes. So for a group, SCT identifies the set of three systems: the group-as-a-whole, the sub-group system which exists in the context of the group-as-a-whole, and the role system which exists in the context of the subgroup system.

Each of these systems, the group-as-a-whole, the subgroups and the role systems, are isomorphic. *Isomorphy* defines that each of the three nested systems are similar in structure and function. Structure is defined by boundaries which can be permeable or impermeable to information. Borrowing from Miller (1978), SCT defines the energy of living human systems as information. Function defines how systems survive, develop and transform through discriminating and integrating differences. Thus, in SCT, the role, subgroup and group-as-a-whole systems will be similar in how open or closed their boundaries are to information/energy and how information/energy is discriminated and integrated within each system. The SCT practice developed from this theory is then applied to systems as small as a person, a couple, or a 'small' group, or as large as a 'large' group, organization, or even a nation.[1]

Developing the Systems-Centred Group Context
In practice, SCT focuses on developing the 'system context' in which people can change. SCT assumes that the system context is the strongest influence on human behaviour and, therefore, SCT deliberately builds the system context that supports exploration and change. Thus SCT develops the systems-centred hierarchy within a group that potentiates development in each of the system contexts, i.e., the group-as-a-whole, the subgroups and the roles.

Functional Subgrouping
Building an SCT group begins by introducing the method of functional subgrouping (Agazarian, 1997). Functional subgrouping is a conflict resolution method that contains the

group conflicts in separate subgroups until the conflict can be discriminated and integrated in the group-as-a-whole. Functional subgrouping implements the theoretical definition of function (discriminating and integrating differences).

In functional subgrouping, members learn to ask, 'Anybody else?', after each member makes a contribution to the group. This behaviour creates a group norm for joining with others to explore similarities. Members of one subgroup contain their side of the group conflict and explore it together in a climate of similarity, and in 'roving' eye contact with each other. When there is a pause, then the members of the 'other' subgroup who hold the other side of the conflict explore together, also in a climate of similarity. As each subgroup works in turn in the security and containment of a climate of similarity, members first discover the differences within their own subgroup. Secondly, members discover the similarities in what was initially different between their own subgroups and other subgroups. This enables an integration of the two sides of the conflict in the group-as-a-whole. In this process, the group-as-a-whole develops from simpler to more complete, as do its members (isomorphy!).[2]

Functional subgrouping interrupts the human tendency to convert or react to difference. Instead, functional subgrouping makes it possible for a group to develop and transform by integrating its differences. SCT distinguishes functional subgroups from stereotyped subgroups. Functional subgrouping helps to dissolve the rigid boundaries that characterize stereotyped subgroups, which are dysfunctional for the cohesion and development of the system.[3]

Weakening the Restraining Forces in the Phases of System Development
SCT also works from the hypothesis that weakening the restraining forces is a more efficient method of change than strengthening driving forces (Lewin, 1951). Weakening restraining forces releases the driving forces available in the system. In addition, building on the work of Bennis and Shephard (1956), SCT has delineated three major phases of system development: authority, intimacy and integration or work (Agazarian, 1994, 1999). The authority phase is dominated by issues of power and control.

The intimacy phase focuses on the separation/individuation conflicts that make intimate relating challenging. The integration or work phase is concerned with the ongoing work of bringing knowledge into context. SCT defines each phase of system development as a system context, and identifies a predictable force field of driving and restraining forces that operationally define each phase of system development. SCT then explicitly weakens the restraining forces that are specific to each phase of system development. The force field for each phase then serves as a map for guiding intervention strategies by weakening the phase-relevant restraining forces which releases the driving forces to development. In this way, the change interventions are paced to the system's phase context. Both sides of the conflicts in each phase can then be discriminated and integrated in the service of system development, using the conflict resolution method of functional subgrouping. For example, in the authority phase, exploring the conflict between dominance and submission often leads to understanding the power in submission and the weakness in dominance and the wish in both sides to be understood. In the intimacy phase, exploring the pull towards enchantment with the wish for blissful merger leads to discovering the differences in the similarities thus enabling separation, while exploring the dis-enchantment and the pull to alienation with others who feel similarly develops a strong bonding among the 'alienated' sub-group who then can individuate (Agazarian, 1994, 2003).

Roles in SCT
Most recently, SCT has been working actively with the impact of roles from a systems view. Roles have been of major interest in sociology and social psychology since the inception of these disciplines, as seen in the work of, for example, George Herbert Mead (1934). Theorizing in sociology and social psychology has been offered from the functional, symbolic interaction, structural organizational, and cognitive perspectives. Also in the family therapy field, Minuchin (1974) has made significant contributions to developing theories about role in the family context using some systems ideas.

Building on the work of role theorists in sociology and social psychology, Agazarian formulated the idea of role as a bridge

construct between the individual and the group (Agazarian and Peters, 1981). Role was conceptualized as playing the same function in both the person and the group, containing the differences that are too different to integrate into the person or group system. Roles are conceptualized as subsystems with relatively impermeable boundaries containing information that neither the person occupying the role nor the larger system context is able to integrate. Roles involve characteristic ways of thinking, perceiving, and feeling, and particular emotional regulation strategies, attitudes and beliefs, and even posture and gestures (Agazarian and Gantt, 2004).[4]

In developing a systems-centred perspective on roles, SCT has introduced a framework on roles that can be applied at all levels of living human systems. For example, roles are conceptualized as systems or subsystems, both within the context of a person-as-a-system and within the context of a group-as-a-system. Thus, roles can be described in terms of their system properties, for example, how permeable are the role boundaries to information, how easily is new information integrated within the role system, what is the larger context in which the role exists, and what is the goal to which the role relates?

SCT also discriminates between functional roles and personalized roles in terms of properties of the systems in which they are embedded. Functional roles have appropriately permeable boundaries in order to facilitate the integration of differences, and relate to the goal and current system context (Gantt, 2005). Personalized roles relate to a past context at the expense of the present context and its goals, have relatively impermeable boundaries, fixed and redundant discriminations, and rarely integrate differences with the consequence of inhibited development. Similarly, stereotyped roles relate to implicit group goals, and are usually related to a personalized historical role as well.

In summary, in one's functional role in a group, one has a centered experience of one's self and simultaneously is related to the goal of the system context. In contrast, stereotypic and personalized roles are not only at the expense of development, but they also compete with, rather than support, the goals of the here-and-now system context.

Roles in the Phases of System Development
SCT also links roles to phases of system development (Agazarian, 1994). Each of the phases is likely to spawn particular roles that can either be functional or stereotypical. For example, with respect to stereotypic roles: the authority phase stimulates roles of helper and identified patient, scapegoat and scapegoater, victim and bully, dominant and submissive; the intimacy phase, the roles of alienated or despairing or merged and blissful; and the integration phase, the stereotypic roles of self-absorbed or task-absorbed (Agazarian and Gantt, 2004). These stereotypic roles are characterized by relatively impermeable boundaries and contain the conflicts and information that the group system has not yet integrated in each of its phases. Each phase of system development must resolve the developmental conflicts inherent in the phase in order to develop into a working system. When stereotypic roles become fixated, they contain system conflicts at the expense of system development.

When stereotypic roles can be 'reclaimed' by the group and the projections into the role undone and explored in functional sub-groups, the information contained within the stereotyped role can be discriminated and integrated. Thus, when stereotyped roles can be explored in functional subgrouping, they can serve as a pathway for group development rather than fixating group development.

SCT identifies predictable triggers to the stereotypic roles as frustration in the authority phase, misattunements in the intimacy phase, and uncertainty in the integration phase. Further, Agazarian has hypothesized that the dominant/submissive role locks identified by SCT are an authority phase response to a failed care-giving/care-seeking interaction (McCluskey, 2002), building on Heard and Lake (1997). Similar to others, SCT also hypothesizes that the roles characteristic of the intimacy phase, where the conflicts relate to separation/individuation and issues of closeness and distance, are linked most strongly to early attachment issues (Bowlby, 1982).

More recently, Agazarian and Gantt (2003, 2004; Ladden et al., 2007) have worked with the idea that role may be a mediating variable in maintaining symptoms in generalized anxiety disorder and other psychological disorders. Misattunements in a group system often stimulate stereotyped and personalized roles. Speci-fically, the enchanted or merged role would relate to anxious-

attachments, and the alienated role to avoidant-attachments. As seen in the next section of this paper, Hopper (2003a, 2003b) has discussed these features of the intimacy phase and its dynamics in terms of personal and interpersonal aspects of (ba) I: A/M as a consequence of failed dependency.

The Theory of Incohesion: Aggregation/Massification or (ba) I: A/M

I: A/M is an acronym for the first letters of Hopper's three-word name for the fourth basic assumption, namely Incohesion: Aggregation/Massification or (ba) I: A/M (Hopper, 2003a, 2003b). However, I: A/M should also be read as 'I am,' which is an assertion of identity when identity is under threat. Like the dynamics of exhibitionism, an assertion of identity is not as convincing as one that is based on authentic feeling and belief. In one way or another, grandiosity and fantasies of omnipotence come into being when dependency fails, i.e. when our parents and our leaders fail us and disappoint us. Such affects and ideas are associated with traumatic experience.

The willingness and ability of the members of a group to refer to a sense of 'we-ness' and 'us-ness' indicate that a social system exists, as do notions of collective identity and of membership. In this, there is a shared recognition of a boundary concerning who is inside and who is outside, or who should be included and who excluded from a particular social system. However, the assertion 'We are' suggests that the existence of the group is under threat, because otherwise there would be no need for the members of the group to assert their identity as members of it. 'We are' might be a statement by a large number of people who are members of a group during states of massification, and 'We are not' during states of aggregation. One of the reasons why these processes can be conceptualized in terms of a so-called 'basic assumption' is that in effect people who have regressed because their groups are under threat are asserting the fantasy that they are not a group but an aggregate, or a mass, both of which are states of collective being that offer protection from extreme anxieties.

Group Trauma and Fear of Annihilation

Group trauma may occur in several inter-related ways. For example:

1. the group may itself become traumatized, possibly through management failures on the part of the group analyst, or by other events that break the boundaries of holding and containment causing the members of the group to feel profoundly unsafe;
2. the members of the group may regress to an early phase of life in which certain kinds of traumatic experience are virtually universal and ubiquitous;
3. the members may share a history of specific kinds of trauma; and
4. processes of equivalence may occur through which traumatic events and processes within the foundation matrix of the group are imported and then enacted.

Trauma activates and provokes the fear of annihilation and its vicissitudes. The phenomenology of the fear of annihilation involves psychic paralysis and the death of psychic vitality, characterized by fission and fragmentation, and then fusion and confusion of what is left of the self with what can be found in the object. Fusion and confusion are a defence against fission and fragmentation, and vice versa. Thus, there is oscillation between these two psychic poles, because each is associated with both its own characteristic psychotic anxieties and its own characteristic modes of defence against them, including the shift to those associated with the opposite poles. For example, the fear of falling apart and of petrification is associated with fission and fragmentation; the fear of suffocation and of being swallowed up is associated with fusion and confusion; but the former offers protection against the latter, and vice versa. Ultimately, disassociation and encapsulation occur as a defence or protection against psychic paralysis.

These bi-polar intrapsychic constellations are associated with two types of personal organization: one, the 'contact shunning' or 'crustacean' and two, the 'merger-hungry' or 'amoeboid'. These two types have often been delineated in similar terms, for example, the crustacean as a schizoid reaction against the fear

of engulfment, and the amoeboid as a clinging reaction against the fear of abandonment.[5]

The Basic Assumption of Incohesion
When the fear of annihilation is prevalent, the group is likely to become a social 'aggregate' through a process of 'aggregation.' (The terms aggregate and aggregation are taken from early sociology and anthropology.) A social aggregate is not quite a group, but nor is it merely a collection of people who have no consciousness of themselves as being part of a social system. Among the metaphors for an aggregate are a collection of billiard balls or a handful of gravel. However, these metaphors are not quite right because they utilize inorganic objects, and the point is that an aggregate involves a degree of libidinous attachment. Perhaps a better metaphor would be a flock of ostriches or flamingos. An aggregate is characterized by contra-groups rather than sub-groups, who experience long periods of silence, and/or various forms of non-communication in general, for example, gaze-avoidance, in which people do not relate to one another. Aggressive feelings are rampant, although they may not be expressed in actual aggression. (Turquet [1975: 103] referred to this state of affairs in terms of 'dissaroy', and Lawrence and his colleagues [1996: 29] in terms of 'me-ness'.)

As a defence against the anxieties associated with aggregation, the group becomes a mass through a process of massification, involving a 'hysterical' idealization of the situation and the leader, and identification with him, leading to feelings of pseudo-morale and illusions of well-being. Among the metaphors for a mass are warm wet sponges squeezed together or a piece of faeces. Some might prefer the icon of a nice piece of chopped fish. Others, a herd of walruses or perhaps a flock of penguins. It is hardly surprising that when Earl lectured on this topic in Dublin, several members of the audience suggested that whereas a bowl of boiled potatoes is the perfect icon for aggregation, a bowl of mashed potatoes is perfect as massification. Similarly, when working with intimacy conflicts one of Susan's groups explored their preference for either baked potatoes or mashed potatoes as metaphors for exploring issues around closeness and distance: one subgroup preferred baked potatoes and the other, mashed potatoes.

Oscillations

This theory of (ba) I: A/M emphasizes processes. Although the first group-based defence against the anxieties associated with aggregation is a shift towards massification, the first group-based defence against the anxieties associated with massification is a shift back towards aggregation, thus precipitating the same anxieties that provoked the first defensive shift from aggregation towards massification. Thus, a group-like social system in which the fear of annihilation is prevalent is likely to be characterized by oscillation between aggregation and massification, the two bi-polar forms of incohesion. However, oscillations are rarely total and complete, and, at any one time vestiges of aggregation can be seen in states of massification, and vestiges of massification in states of aggregation.

The Emergent Roles: Crustaceans and Amoeboids

Traumatized people tend to use projective and introjective identifications involving the repetition compulsion and trauma-tophilia, in the service of expulsion of horrific states of mind, and in attempting to attack and control their most hated objects, because the symbolic process has failed. However, these processes are also used in the service of communication of experience that is not available through conscious narrative.

In trauma, people are exceedingly vulnerable to role suction, because specific roles offer them skins of identity. Traumatized people are also likely to create the roles in question. Thus, this process is recursive.

During the oscillations between aggregation and massification, typical roles emerge, as is the case for all basic assumptions. However, people with crustacean character structures are likely to personify aggregation processes, and those with amoeboid character structures, massification processes. For example, the 'lone wolf' role is typical of aggregation, and the 'cheerleader' role of massification; and people with crustacean defences are likely to become lone wolves, and those with amoeboid defences are likely to become cheerleaders. Aggregation and massification processes are likely to generate many other roles as well, especially in connection with patterns of aggression.

Aggressive Feelings and Aggression
Aggression and its personal and collective vicissitudes are very important in the dynamics of Incohesion. Obviously, with respect to aggregation, but less obviously with respect to massification! In fact, the study of aggression during massification has been totally neglected, although it is vital to any consideration of topics such as terrorism, fundamentalism, and fascism, all of which may be seen in the life of traumatized organizations and organizations of traumatized people, although without the bloodshed that is usually associated with these processes.

   Crustacean, contact-shunning characters and amoeboid, merger-hungry characters are especially likely to personify the processes of aggression associated with Incohesion. Crustacean and amoeboid characters have great difficulty in acknowledging and experiencing aggressive feelings, both in themselves and in others. Both types of character feel unconsciously compelled to communicate the story of their traumatic experience, but when the narrator is unable to tell his story in a particular way, or when he has no one to listen to it, he attempts unconsciously to communicate through enactments. However, when crustaceans become angry, they become cold and over-contained; and when amoeboids become angry, they become intrusive and engulfing, based on their tendencies towards vacuole incorporation.

'Transgenerational' Transmission
It is important to recognize that the fourth basic assumption and its vicissitudes are likely to be perpetuated over time and even across the generations, as well as from macro social systems to their component micro social systems, and vice versa. Of course, adequate mourning and reparation is required in order for people to break these vicious circles and cycles, but they rarely have or take the opportunities that are necessary for authentic mourning, which actually makes matters worse. For example, but only as an example, the loss of a leader is almost always associated with failed dependency, which in turn is experi-enced as traumatic. Consequently, following the loss of a leader, especially through such processes as those associated with assassination, social systems tend towards aggregation, whether primarily or secondarily, because the loss of a leader is analogous to a person losing his head. Panic is likely to ensue, but this is

likely to be followed by massification. Within this context people are unable and unwilling to mourn. Traumatogenic processes then become attached to chosen trauma, and are transmitted across the generations.

The Cohesion of the Work Group

A more healthy work group, in contrast to a basic assumption group, is manifest in its cohesion, as opposed to the incohesion of a basic assumption group. Cohesion is seen in integration, inter-dependence and solidarity, involving optimal degrees of co-operation combined with individuality, as well as coherence with respect to the communication systems of the group. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the dynamics of the work group.

Part II of this paper continues in the next issue of this journal where the retrospective reports from the group members are presented and discussed from these two perspectives.

Notes

1. In his work on the dynamics of large groups Hopper (1975) also addressed the idea of isomorphy and formulated a somewhat different perspective. He argued that isomorphy is a matter of degree, and even its existence cannot be assumed. Moreover, the theory, concepts and vocabulary that are applicable to the explication of the dynamics of one system cannot necessarily be applied, at least not in the same way, to another system (sub or contextual). Also, it is absolutely essential to specify the processes through which the dynamics of one system are exported and imported to another, which is often based on projective and introjective identification.
2. Hopper (1975) conceptualized several dimensions of social systems with respect to which they might be compared; one dimension was conceptualized in terms of the continuum ranging from the 'simple' to the 'complex' with respect to the degree of role differentiation and specialization.
3. Hopper (2003a and 2003b) refers to subgroups as opposed to contragroups, based on intra-psychic encapsulations, which in more complex social systems are likely to lead to enclaves and ghettoes.
4. Hopper (2003b) refers to 'styles' of thinking and feeling, and styles of leadership, followership, and bystandership, to which styles of 'rescueship' must also be added. He specifies these phenomena as dimensions of all basic assumptions, and implies that such styles will characterize the ways that roles are interpreted and enacted.
5. Using a Kleinian model of the mind, Bion (1961) conceptualized three basic assumptions associated with specific kinds of anxieties and roles: Dependency,

associated with envy, idealization and the roles of omnipotence and grandi-
osity, on the one hand, and passive compliance, on the other; Fight/Flight,
associated with envy, denigration and roles of attack, on the one hand, and
retreat, on the other; and Pairing, associated with the use of sexuality as a
manic defence against depressive position anxieties and the roles of romantic
illusionaries, on the one hand, and messianic Salvationists, on the other.
However, using an alternative model of the mind associated with the
Group of Independent Psychoanalysts of the British Psychoanalytical
Society, and shared by sociology and group analysis (Hopper, 2003a and
b), Hopper conceptualized a fourth basic assumption of Incohesion: Aggrega-
tion/Massification or (ba) I: A/M. This theory puts helplessness and trau-
matic experience at the centre of the human condition, rather than envy
based on the so-called 'death instinct.' This theory will be elaborated in the
next section of the text.

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