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## Fragile Boundaries: A Group-analytic Experience with Secretaries

*Elisabeth Rohr*

*In an experiential group-analytic group with women secretaries from various counselling services in the Frankfurt area, the typical secretarial working condition and the setting of the counselling service were reproduced and mirrored. Through the slow emergence of fears, anxieties and mutual mistrust in the group the members' hidden structural conflict became obvious and could in part be worked through.*

The setting for the group was unusual: since the group was organized through a network of social counselling services, I did not get to know the members until the first meeting. Ten meetings were planned, with the option of extension. The meetings took place once a month and lasted one-and-a-half hours. Members were not only allowed free time to participate in the group, but could also rely on their offices for subsidizing costs. Secretaries who decided to take part in this vocationally related experiential group did so voluntarily, without any pressure or demands from their respective institutions. Of the twelve originally registered participants, three did not show up and two dropped out after the first four or five meetings.

It was intended to be an applied group-analytic approach, concentrating on the specific needs and working conditions of this group of professionals. Since this was mentioned in the announcement that had been sent to most of the offices of counselling services, it was quite clear that the secretaries who came did not come as patients. For that reason I prefer to speak of

a vocationally related experiential group and to point out the difference from a patient group.

This type of group-analytic work could be placed somewhere between supervision and group analysis. The subject of discussion was the working situation, problems with the team, with clients and with the administration. But also considered was the women's professional background, how and why they became secretaries in counselling services.

A lot of time was spent looking at the different rôles they would take over at work: for example, being 'mother' of the institute, or the well-adapted daughter, ready to take over all duties without protest. Left out was the dimension of the individual's family biography. Nevertheless, there was a strong group-analytic process and deep regression and intensive transference and countertransference processes took place.

In contrast to the first group of secretaries I worked with and continued to work with into the third year, from the beginning this group became involved in conflicts, with a lot of fear and extreme mistrust.

The secretaries started the first meeting by describing their individual working conditions and continued by talking about the relationship between secretary and colleagues. Soon the discussion narrowed into one, obviously, vital question: was it right or wrong to address the colleagues in the office with the informal *Du* (you)? As you may know, in the German language there exists a sharp distinction between the formal *Sie*, reserved for strangers and in general used in professional life, and the informal *Du*, reserved for friends and family members. Although times and traditions in most professional fields are changing, it is the rule to keep to the formal *Sie*. Much as they struggled over this question, members could not solve the matter and became increasingly impatient and angry.

At this point I described my impression of what was happening in the group, saying that I felt there was a lot of anxiety because they were all strangers to each other and did not know if they should distance themselves and use the formal *Sie*, or if they dared to move closer together and use the informal *Du*. I said that the difficulty of not being able to come to a general conclusion, produced anger and aggression.

The ambivalence between trust and mistrust, distance and closeness could be felt strongly in the group. The proposal of

one of the women to use the informal *Du* in the group brought no solution, because it was obvious that not everybody agreed. There was extreme pressure towards unity and homogeneity, and the dissident votes created a lot of irritation. Finally, just a few minutes before the end of the meeting, one of the women, who had kept on defending her position of keeping at a distance, said she felt hurt, ridiculed and excluded, and did not want to come any more.

The group was shaken and felt guilty. Nobody had wanted to hurt her and everybody was upset that this had happened. It seemed difficult for them to accept that they, who had come to the group to talk about their suffering at work, could make someone else suffer. They repeatedly reassured the woman that her desire to keep to the formal *Sie* was accepted, but the despair they felt would not go away.

Finally I came to understand that what had happened in the group was a mirror of their working situation. There, they were usually the only secretary in a team of psychologists, social workers and counsellors. I expressed my thoughts and they confirmed my impression that at work many times they felt left out, left alone, excluded, misunderstood and hurt; not accepted because of their different views, their non-therapeutical perspective, their non-academic education, and yet with a strong desire nevertheless to belong to the team. Many of the members now reported incidents when they had been laughed at or felt undermined because they had dared to voice their opinion and were told that this was the voice of the man in the street.

Since there was not a lot of time left to talk about this problem, members started arguing with me to extend the time limit, and even though I reminded them of our working contract, they simply refused to leave and remained on their chairs, making me feel extremely helpless and angry. Never before had I experienced such a situation, and their anger, frustration and reproach were hard to bear. I finally left the room and heard them talk and then after quite a while leave, still talking excitedly.

Throughout the ten meetings I never completely lost this feeling of being incapable of conducting this group; I felt like a bad mother, not able to save the women from hurting each other, from their overwhelming helplessness, from ambivalence. This countertransference showed how much the secretaries wanted a powerful conductor, and how disappointed and angry they

were that I neither helped them to avoid conflicts and aggression, nor helped them to overcome their prevailing mistrust and differences.

In one way or another the ambivalence of mistrust and the desire for unity accompanied us throughout the course of our work. And something else accompanied us: their anger about the time limit. They always would try to overstay, they were never ready to leave at the set time, they never had the feeling that the meeting really had come to an end.

Slowly I came to understand, that the first meeting had reproduced the major pattern of the secretarial working situation and that the analytic technique of minimal structuring correlated with the structure of a secretary's work, which is by its nature unstructured. There is no continuous or steady working process: secretaries in counselling offices are constantly interrupted by 'phone calls, by clients ringing at the door, by counsellors coming in to chat, or having a cup of coffee, or just wanting to hear a nice story for a change. And how many times a day would the head of the institute come rushing into the office, asking the secretary to drop everything she was doing and type these minutes of a meeting that had to be ready that very afternoon. Or one of the counsellors would come in five minutes before closing time, urging her to type a letter that absolutely had to be posted that very day.

Secretaries felt a strong expectation by the staff that they should be available for everybody at all times and this, if possible, with pleasure, eagerness and never-ending patience and understanding. Never daring to refuse created a feeling of never having finished anything properly, of not being efficient and of not being able to cope with the daily work load. But at the same time the overwhelming demands made them feel like almighty mothers and sometimes like the secret chief of the institute, because there was no doubt that they could easily manipulate the whole team, withholding information, misplacing files (as they cheerfully admitted), getting sick when they were most needed, distributing favours, forgetting messages, and so on. Their type of work actually helped them to nourish phantasies, for example, when typing minutes of the counsellors' meetings with clients. This put them in the position of knowing intimately what was going on behind those closed doors and they knew this from each one of the counsellors. But, of course, this knowledge

also had a very frightening quality, reactivating memories of similar experiences that clients were describing. In contrast to the counsellors, they were not capable, and did not have the tools, to handle situations like these adequately. Being left alone with these frightening memories there arose in many of them the fear of implosion. The group was for many the first opportunity to talk about these matters.

On the other hand, their feeling of omnipotence could easily be used — or should I say abused — by the counselling staff. A secretary who was made to feel like the almighty mother was eager to take over all kinds of non-secretarial duties, like taking care of clients' children, when they came in for counselling. In fact they would only feel powerful, efficient and satisfied, when they managed to comply with the most impossible demands, or achieve something they never had managed to achieve before. This meant continuously going beyond boundaries, negating their own limits. But then again their feeling of omnipotence clashed most painfully with their professional reality, their low pay, their position at the bottom of the hierarchy, their dependency and their many experiences of being undermined in front of the whole team, of not being considered smart enough to have an opinion that was worthwhile thinking about.

The women described their situation as a scene taken out of a horror movie. They said they felt like prisoners in a glasshouse, with no privacy, or, as one of the women put it, the only place where we can be alone is the toilet. There was no intimacy, no peace, no quietness elsewhere. Many of them felt very lonely at work, even though they hardly ever were alone. But the glasshouse effect had even penetrated their bodies; they had the feeling also that their bodies and souls were made out of glass, because they could not keep thoughts and feelings to themselves. When asked, they would say things they did not want to say, as if the window in their office door was a window to their inner self: there was nothing they could hide, nothing they could keep to themselves, as if their inner being was a supermarket and everybody could take what they wanted. This made them not only extremely vulnerable, but also extremely distrustful. Anybody could hurt them, there was no way to protect themselves.

Being in the group reproduced exactly this feeling of sitting in a glasshouse, of having no boundaries, being without shelter. The members showed others their feelings, talked about their

suffering, but could not bear it when this experience was mirrored, enlarged, emphasized, and of course sometimes distorted by and through the group.

This experience was the major source of their mistrust and since I did not take over the rôle of a strong leader, structuring their experience in the group, they also felt left alone by me, in the way that they felt left alone by the counsellors.

For my part, I had to struggle at this time with the idea of wanting to achieve the impossible, to heal their wounds and take away their sorrow. It was hard to bear their suffering and keep to the analytic rule of abstinence. I felt under a lot of pressure and strain. I tried to be extremely careful with all my interventions, thinking about their fragile boundaries that were made out of glass and which could easily collapse altogether. The women now frequently talked about their anger and disappointment, of having nobody to take care of them, of not finding anyone to help them solve their problems, because everybody was always busy with clients. Their jealousy was quite obvious. But when asked if it was their wish to be a client for once that had brought them into this group, they vigorously denied this. I understood that it was still too early for them to admit a hidden desire to be a client in this group, because then the other members would have been too jealous, fearing that nothing would be left for them.

Writing this paper I thought that maybe unconsciously I myself as a conductor transmitted a message to them not to be a client in this group, since I had emphasized so much the vocationally related aspects of this type of group analysis. I now remember that the first time they had wanted to stay longer I told them that this was not possible, because another group was coming soon. So this was a repeat of the situation they knew from their offices, which I did not recognize at that time.

My other group of secretaries had solved their initial fear of the group in an altogether different, but nevertheless very specific way: it took me quite some time to notice their interactional pattern. One of the women would usually take over the rôle of the client, talking about her problems, about her difficulties, and the rest of the group acted as counsellors, giving good advice, but also sharing their experiences with similar problems. Very democratically everybody was allowed her turn to be a client and it was not too difficult to start talking about

their feeling that many times they would do a better counselling job than their colleagues. In the group they would dare to speak up when one of them used too much of the precious time. There was a lot of solidarity in this group and even friendships developed; they would always go and have coffee together after the group was over. In the intervals when the group did not meet, they created a secretarial network of mutual aid, by exchanging addresses and encouraging each other to 'phone one of the group when help was needed. This network functioned very well and gave them the feeling of being experts in their field of work, capable of supporting each other and finding solutions for difficult problems on their own. Their wish for dependency was denied for a long time, but was talked about after having established over two years a strong and stable peer group, providing them with confidence and trust in their own abilities and creative potentials and giving them the feeling of being able to handle their professional tasks and duties efficiently.

On the other hand, in the second group the difficulties did not vanish. And the prevailing mistrust did not allow the development of a cohesive group process.

These were difficult times for the group-as-a-whole; many missed meetings without prior announcement. Two dropped out without any explanation, and the rest kept on arguing about extending the time limit of each session, but at the same time they thought about not extending the course beyond the originally planned ten meetings. A new topic of discussion, suicide, was introduced shortly after they had talked extensively about the glasshouse situation. The women talked about clients and patients, who called up announcing their suicidal plans, and how the secretary would try to keep them on the line and prevent them from jumping out of the window. They did not dare to disturb one of the counsellors, who was with a client, and ask for help. Sometimes they managed to prevent the suicide, sometimes they failed.

Some of the secretaries reported about rules they had set up in their office to prevent the secretary having to deal with suicidal cases. Some of the women now listened very carefully and wanted to propose such measures to be taken up in their own offices as well; but others always found arguments as to why such rules would not work in their case. But it seemed as if at least some of them could now part with the shared idea that



this group could not offer anything to anybody and they finally seemed more able to leave behind destructive ambitions, preventing each other from getting what they all longed for, which was mutual support.

This now became rather typical of the group process, where a few fought against all rules and boundaries, as if they were their enemies, whereas others could take home some suggestions for rules and regulations that helped to relieve a secretary's working conditions. But it was extremely difficult to integrate their divergent attitudes, to make them understand that differences could be an enrichment rather than something which is dangerous and separates one from the other.

Coming into the group had originally meant that all kinds of wishes and hopes would be fulfilled that could not be realized in their daily frame of work. Foremost they had been looking for solidarity among equals, for communication with other secretaries, for understanding among women, for support of sisters; instead, they had found mistrust, competition and aggression. They had looked for a powerful conductor to allow them to show the extent of their vulnerability and at the same time to protect them against aggression and attacks from their colleagues; instead they had found a weak conductor, incapable of taking away their deficiencies, their mistrust, their differences. They could not bear not to be supported by colleagues, not to be understood, but at the same time they could not tolerate different views. They were overwhelmed by disappointment: not even among equals had they found solidarity and instead they had to struggle with mistrust, rivalry and aggression.

For these women, who had a tendency not to accept boundaries, the job as a secretary fitted their inner disposition, but at the same time brought to a head their main conflict: to want solidarity, yet to find mistrust within themselves.

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