

Abstracts from other Journals

Figure and Ground

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This review parallels a journey I have taken through architecture, psychoanalysis, systemic therapy, and group analysis. These articles are not all recent. Some go back to early in my career and follow the theme of “Figure and Ground”. I interleave my journey with the chosen abstracts and my own commentary.

I began my adult life by training as an architect, a career I had wanted to follow from my early teens. As I had been told that it was not possible to train as a psychotherapist in New Zealand, I became an architect instead, and became engrossed by working out how to create physical structures that would support “good enough” emotional relationships. In my first year at the school of architecture I remember being introduced to gestalt psychology as it applies to perception and making collages to demonstrate the laws of “figure and ground” and, specifically, the way we are innately driven to experience things in as good a gestalt or configuration as possible. The mind adjusts to what it wants to see to make sense of its perception through the laws of closure, similarity, proximity and continuity.

Figure—Ground in Gestalt Psychology

Max Wertheimer developed Gestalt psychology, based on the observation that we often experience separate things as if they are connected. He saw that we see a moving string of lights when lights flash in rapid succession like the Christmas lights that appear to move around the tree. This perception arises because the whole event contains relationships among the individual lights that we experience as well. Gestalt means a unified or meaningful whole.

Gestalt psychology had an enormous impact on Kurt Goldstein who was a neurologist who developed a holistic view of brain function, based on research that showed that people with brain damage learned to use other parts of their brains in compensation. Foulkes, the founder of group analysis, was a student of Goldstein’s at the Frankfurt School.

Nitzgen, D. (2010). Hidden legacies. S. H. Foulkes, Kurt Goldstein and Ernst Cassirer. *Group Analysis*, 43(3), 354-371.

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Apart from being himself a creative and prolific writer, Malcolm Pines has also been an important editor of group analytic writings. In that role, he has generously encouraged, furthered and tutored a good many group analysts in their own efforts to write (including myself). As an editor, a particular focus and concern of Malcolm's have been the writings of S. H. Foulkes, which he tirelessly sought to make public and to promote — and which, after all, was never an easy task from the beginning. The following article has been written to honour this huge editorial effort, its intellectual rigour and underlying eros. In it, I shall (re) approach Foulkes' early review of Kurt Goldstein's *The Organism* (1934), one of his lesser known articles which was to appear in English only after Foulkes' death. Translated and abridged by E. Foulkes and introduced by M. Pines, it missed some of the nuances of the German original, and thus important traces regarding the scientific background of Foulkes' work, especially the legacy of Goldstein's cousin, the philosopher E. Cassirer.

Before coming to the UK in 1933, Foulkes worked in close cooperation with Kurt Goldstein at the Frankfurt school. It was here that Goldstein developed his theory of brain-mind relationships. He applied the figure-ground principle from perception to the whole organism, presuming that the whole organism serves as the ground for the individual stimulus forming the figure — thus formulating an early criticism of the simple behaviouristic stimulus-response-theory.

Figure and Ground in Foulkes' Thinking



Goldstein based his work on what he called the law of *pragnanz*, meaning pregnant with meaning. A famous gestalt is the old women/young woman image. Although there is only one image, we can see two different things just by changing our attitude. It seems impossible to see both the young women and the old woman at the same time. This back and forth movement in perception is central to group analysis where the conductor constantly changes focus between the individual, the group as a whole and the relationship between the two. This shifting of figure and ground enables meaning to be found for the other. Foulkes' description of group analysis is that it is a form of therapy of the group by the group, including the conductor.

Foulkes, S H. (1974). My philosophy in psychotherapy. *Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 6(2), 109-114.

Psychotherapy is always concerned with the whole person. The human being is a social animal *that* cannot live isolation. In order to see *a person* as a whole, one has to see *them* in a group, either that in which *they live* and in which *their* conflicts arise or, on the contrary,

in a group of strangers where *the person* can re-establish *their* conflicts in pure culture. The group is the background, the horizon, the frame of reference of the total situation.

Psychoanalysis sees the individual as a background. It highlights processes emanating from the body and those resulting from precipitations of early “object” relations or even inherited prohibitions and taboos. The person gets to know the meaning of everything that affects them in terms of their own desires, fears, phantasies, as the primary source. This view inevitably supports the idea of the individual as the elementary unit, who must form relationships with others in a roundabout, often very complicated way. The individual is forced to do this by their needs for which the others are “objects”. As we have each our own body, our own eyes, our own brain, so we have our own mind. The mind is inside us, everything else outside us. Only by projecting back into primordial times can it be admitted that the group was, after all, there before the individual. It will be seen that I was led to a very different image of the nature of mind.

Figure and Ground in Group Analysis

Foulkes took the idea of figure and ground a step further with his concept of the matrix. When people first join the group, they bring all their life experiences, history and culture with them, in a largely unconscious set of expectations. It is this “Foundation Matrix” that influences how they first experience the group. As each person begins to become involved in the real group, a “Dynamic Matrix” forms and then each matrix provides an oscillating figure and ground for each other.

Scholz, R. (2003). The foundation matrix — A useful fiction. *Group Analysis*, 36(4), 548-554.

In this article, the author focuses on Foulkes’s concept of the foundation matrix, re-examining its heuristic value in a theory of unconscious processes, trying to outline what could be the “contents” of the foundation matrix as well as to formulate the related media of communication. Emphasis is laid on the significance of bodily communication, including gestures and rituals as conceptualized by the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as “habitus”.

Stacey, R., (2000). Complexity and the group matrix. *Group Analysis*, 34(2), 221-239.

This article explores the potential that the natural sciences of complexity may have for offering analogies and insights with regard to communicative processes in a group and the concept of the group matrix. Foulkes’ last formulation of the concept of the group matrix is reviewed before the author draws on the thoughts of G. H. Mead on mind, self and society, and on some analogies from the complexity sciences, to suggest a formulation of the emergence of mind in communicative interaction in a group.

In this article Stacey argues that the group matrix is not a system but processes of interaction in which intersubjective narrative themes pattern the members’ embodied experience of being together. I have suggested that these are self-organising processes that emergently re-produce themselves as bodily actions, always with the potential for transformation. In other words, themes produce further emergent themes patterning the experience of being together in potentially transformative ways.

Figure and Ground — Changing Cultural Contexts

My own immigrant history has always led me to be concerned about what happens to the psyche when the cultural context or background becomes so unrecognisable that nothing can be made sense of anymore. What happens to the figure of the individual when the back“ground” context is replaced in circumstances such as immigration, colonisation, massive social trauma and huge change?

Rohr, E. (2013). From conflict to recognition: Cultural transformation through group supervision in Guatemala. *Group Analysis*, 46(3), 272 -265.

In this article I am describing 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. 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.

Figure and Ground — Whose Trauma is it?

As a member of what is usually referred to as the Second Generation after the Shoah, for much of my life I have been preoccupied with making sense of the transmission of trauma from one generation to another. It is an engrossing and life-time’s work.

Laub, D., & Auerhahn, N. (1993). Knowing and not knowing massive psychic trauma: Forms of traumatic memory. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 74, 287-302.

It is in the nature of trauma to elude knowledge, both because of deficit and defence. Massive trauma cannot be grasped because there are neither words nor categories of thought adequate to its representation; knowledge of trauma is also fiercely defended against, as it poses a momentous threat to psychic integrity. Yet knowing nevertheless occurs on some level, often in restricted or defensive forms.

This paper sets forth various forms of knowing and not knowing massive historical trauma as manifested in clinical symptomatology, transference phenomena, life themes and witnessing narratives. Metaphor is also mentioned as yet another form of knowing and addressing trauma, available primarily to those who have not been directly affected as victims nor as family members of victims. The different forms imply a continuum of progressively more integrated and subjectively owned levels of knowing, directly related to the actual and psychological distance from the traumatic event. Illustrations drawn from clinical and testimonial settings are given for each level of knowing described, and implications for therapeutic strategy are discussed.

Figure and Ground — The Large Group

The large group is a context that not only painfully evokes social situations in the present but also enables the possibility to make some personal sense of them and to make changes that previously felt impossible.

Blackwell, R. (2009). Patrick de Maré: Review and legacy. *Group Analysis*, 42(3), 300-302.

Pat would often say, “The small group socialises the individual, the large group humanises society.”

I encountered Pat’s work on large groups in the mid-1970s, and was drawn to it because it offered an approach to some important political questions. At that time there was increasing recognition of certain problems concerning the nature of “democracy”. If democracy was government of the people, for the people, by the people, then that ought to mean them having some sort of say in the decisions that affected their lives. Voting once every five years or so for a national government, and in between times, at about the same frequency, for local councils, seemed to leave those who were elected completely in charge until the next election. It was, in effect, an elected dictatorship. This was clearly better than an unelected dictatorship, but it still had a lot of shortcomings.

The Social Context as Foreground

Ormay, T. (2013). The 37th S. H. Foulkes Annual Lecture: One person is no person
Group Analysis, 46(4), doi:10.1177/0533316413498840

Our social nature had been an intelligent assumption for a long time, until biology demonstrated it in the 1960s. Psychoanalysis, the science of human nature has been based on selfish foundations, and its structural theory presents us with a single, lonely person of id, ego and superego. Even Foulkes, who based his group theories on psychoanalysis, could only speculate about our social nature, but gave us the fundamental notion of the social unconscious. In the 1960s biology scientifically demonstrated the social instinct. Yet, the various thinkers, who tried to enlarge group analytic thinking, continued speculating, and did not make use of the social instinct, although it was there. As if the body, the material part of us was not important, as if we existed all up there, in some higher regions. We need our body for love, and a theory good enough to understand it. What I have to offer is a personality theory based on instincts, or with other words, on the psychological affects of our genes. Our ego develops out of the older selfish instinct, as elaborated by psychoanalysis. But the new social instinct provides the foundations of our genuinely social nature, I call “nos”, Latin for “we”. Accordingly the new structural theory is made up of the id, ego and nos. On such a foundation we can build a consistent social group analytic theory.

What is Figure and What is Ground — Is There Such a Thing as Objectivity?

In my training as a systemic therapist, I came across Humberto Maturana, a Chilean biologist who has many interesting things to say about social systems and perception. In particular he drew my attention to the fact that we can only understand things in terms of their background, or, to use his terms, within the parenthesis that frames our perception.

González, G. (2011). Living in parenthesis. A layman's experiences of knowing Maturana. *Constructivist Foundations*, 6(3), 388-392.

Problem: Starting with his personal experience the author pursues the question: How can we alter our way of living, sensoriality and reflective skills so that we can handle today's information flows, which nowadays are so large that they create confusion and ineffective educational actions? **Method:** The approach to follow is called "parenthesisism", a practice based on Maturana's theoretical frameworks of the "biology of cognition" and the "biology of love". **Results:** One of the findings when a person lives in parenthesisism is the ability to see their own dogmatism and stubbornness when that person would otherwise be blind to his/her own convictions. **Implications:** Many aspects of this essay, and this manner of thinking, are circular and tautological, and hence may appear illogical to the reader. However, the author claims that existence is not solely logical, and that in a complex matrix circular and recursive relationships are common, and that these can best be understood through circular and recursive logics. Furthermore the relevance of parenthesisism for UNESCO's view on learning paradigms is reviewed in this light.



Teresa von Sommaruga Howard has multiple professional and personal backgrounds that give her a unique possibility to view the world in many ways. Born in the UK, the daughter of at least two cultures, she immigrated to New Zealand at the age of five with her family where she grew up and was educated. She is now based in the UK and works in a number of countries throughout the world in a variety of settings using her skills as an architect, systemic family therapist and group-analytic psychotherapist, specialising in median and large groups. She has written and published a number of papers and book chapters and is the Treasurer of the International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes and co-editor of its journal, *Forum*. Contact details: teresa@justdialogue.com.