
'We' With a Capital W

An interview with Farhad Dalal

Stephen Appel

Farhad Dalal is a training group analyst and supervisor for the Institute of Group Analysis, London. He is in private practice as a psychotherapist and group analyst. He has recently published *Taking the Group Seriously: Towards a Post-Foulkesian Group Analytic Theory*, (1998: London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley) which Malcolm Pines has called "a tough, exciting book". The following interview, conducted via email, is a discussion of some of Dalal's principal ideas.

SA: Farhad, tell us a little about yourself.

FD: I was born in Bombay into a Parsee family. We came to London in 1964 when my father, a civil servant, had a three year posting to the Indian High Commission. At the end of this period they went back to India, and I remained to finish off my schooling, and then university (where I studied physics), and stayed on and on.

My first career was as a teacher of mathematics and physics in a secondary school. I did this off and on for 14 years. Whilst teaching I did my first training in a Humanistic psychotherapy (where I met my New Zealand-born wife). Following this I started working in private practice and did my second training as a Group Analyst at the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA) in London.

SA: Can you say a little about your current work?

FD: I work primarily as a psychotherapist and group analyst—seeing individuals, couple therapy (with my wife as co-therapist), running groups, doing supervisions, staff groups and the like. I am also increasingly involved with the training at the IGA, and am now the chair of the training committee. I keep one a day a week clear for writing.

SA: Who would you say have been the most important influences on your therapeutic thinking?

FD: Things change. Twenty to twenty-five years ago I was much more into mystical and humanistic thinkers—none come particularly to mind now. My thinking now is firmly in the psychoanalytic frame, but it is a critical relationship. I find that I have a greater affinity with the ideas of Winnicott and Fairbairn rather than Klein, say. I think that Freud is a genius even though I do not go along with his instinctivist and individualistic rendition of human nature. At present the people I am most influenced by are the works of the father of group analysis S. H. Foulkes, and the sociologist Norbert Elias. Elias is little known. He is a truly revolutionary thinker, who turns many of our accepted ideas on their heads—in particular those about the relationship between individuals and groups.

SA: I'm struck by your comment on Freud. It summarises a problem that I think many of us share; how to be critical without being dismissive; how to be a follower without being a devotee. I'm currently reading Louis Breger's recent biography. *Freud: Darkness in the Midst of Vision*. Breger is himself a psychoanalyst, but in his eagerness not to be a zealot he inadvertently writes a book which is more destructive to Freud's reputation than those like Jeffrey Masson and Frederick Crews who are frank in their antipathy to the man and his ideas. It seems very hard for his descendants to find the right distance from our forefather.

FD: I agree!

SA: Can you say in a nutshell what in your opinion are the major contributions of Foulkes and Elias?

FD: What both of them do, is to remind us that the notion of the individual and the notion of the group are not antithetical to each other. Particularly, Elias reminds us of 'habits of thought' in which we dichotomise reality, and then not only do we experience the poles of the dichotomy as antithetical to each other, we suppose that each of the poles can have an existence without the other. He says that existence is process—but because this is hard to conceptualize, we continually misinterpret it as a series of states. For example, we represent the process called mind (which is continual movement), as a series of structures and states at war with each other—called (say) the ego, superego and id.

SA: Foulkes, of course, is a major figure in group psychoanalysis. But I find it intriguing that Elias is so little known. I myself have his *What is Sociology?* on my shelves but haven't got to it yet. Do you have any ideas about why he has become one of those thinkers that many have heard of, but few have read?

FD: There are several reasons for this. 1. Elias' ideas are fairly radical, and so it requires us to turn many of our usual ways of thinking on their heads. 2. His magnum opus, *The Civilizing Process*, was published in German just as the second world war broke out, and so was little known until many years later. He himself tends to write without locating his ideas in the larger intellectual schema—in other words he keeps himself out, a self-styled maverick.

SA: One starting point for your argument is that “although Foulkes tried to take the group seriously, for a variety of reasons, he was unable to do so” (1998: 12). What would it mean to take the group seriously?

FD: To take the group seriously is not to succumb to the fantasy of individualism. In this way of thinking we imagine that our individuality is something we are born with, and that this uniqueness is constantly threatened by participation in groups. Thus there is a fear of groups—a fantasy in which we imagine that we have a choice about whether to live or not [to live] in groups. Elias puts all of this much more neatly—he says that the ‘we’ is prior to the ‘I’, and that the ‘we’ is part of the ‘I’—and cannot be otherwise.

It is interesting to note that the conventions of written English are such that we capitalize the ‘I’ but not the ‘w’ in ‘we’. To take the group seriously is to capitalize the ‘We’ too.

SA: The issue you are tackling is a fundamental one—what in traditional sociology is called the macro-micro problem. Some have said that our most pressing theoretical problem is to reconcile Marx and Freud. In my own work I have tried to use Althusser as the bridge. In the chapter “Interlude Between Foulkes and Elias” you talk about the continental structuralist and post structuralist traditions. Is the fact that you have used Elias rather than, say, Levi-Strauss, Foucault, or Derrida simply a personal preference, or do you see his work as superior for your task?

FD: I have used Elias because he fits more organically with group analytic theory—i.e. his influences on Foulkes. Knowing little about Foucault

and Derrida, I am unable to say whether he is superior to them or not. I think that they are all circling the same area.

SA: Say something about what you have called the “Radical Foulkes” and the “Orthodox Foulkes”.

FD: They are roughly the same as an “Eliasian Foulkes” and a “Freudian Foulkes”. I have called the former radical because it subverts many of our cherished notions in the project of psychotherapy. For example, If the ‘we’ is a structural part of the ‘I’, and the ‘I’ is formed out of the material of the ‘we’, then what will this mean for the notion of individuation? Will it necessarily be a good thing? And if so, will the word retain the same connotations that it has at present? The theory is also radical because not only does it problematize the I, it also problematizes the we. Another way of putting it is to say that it problematizes the relation of the part to the whole—saying neither of them are ‘natural’ objects in any sense, and the shapes both happen to take in any moment are contingent on socio-historic processes.

SA: Yes. Basil Bernstein puts the social/personal problem like this: “How does the outside become the inside, and how does the inside reveal itself and shape the outside?” You seem to be arguing that these questions begin too late in the story because they assume a pre-existing individual. How does Elias go behind this individual-group dichotomy?

FD: Elias says that the individual versus social debate is conducted in an impossible space in which it is supposed that society is something beyond individuals and that individuals have an existence outside society. Neither is true. Human beings only exist as humans-in-relation. The fact of being in relation is the critical thing. Elias introduces the term “figuration” to describe this state of affairs. Foulkes uses the notion of traffic as an example of this. Traffic consists of nothing but individual cars and drivers, each “doing their own thing”, yet it gives rise to something called “traffic” which appears to have a “will” of its own, and constrains the possibilities of what each driver may or may not do. Further, intrinsic to the notion of figuration is the notion of power. Elias is says that power is an aspect of every relationship; no one is completely powerful and no one completely powerless. It is the differential that is significant.

SA: Those who want to know more will hopefully go on to read your chapter on Elias, of course. Nevertheless, can you outline your path through Elias's concepts which leads you later to an outline of a post-Foulkesian group analytic theory?

FD: This is really too big a question for me—it requires a book to answer it. Someone else might well be able to paraphrase it, but I am up too close to manage that feat. Perhaps I can approach it obliquely.

One of the problems with the individual-group dichotomy is that it is conflated with the free will-determinism dichotomy to make it appear that individuals are free and somehow authentic, and when they combine with others then they are somehow corrupted. An instance of this occurred this very morning: a female patient having lived most of her life on her own, recently formed a relationship. She was concerned that her authentic self was going to be lost or diluted or corrupted in some way by living with another. We can see that this anxiety is predicated on the Rousseauian fantasy that individuals in themselves are free, and that when people come together then their natural state is somehow spoiled.

Elias' notion of figuration cuts through this false dichotomy to show that the two states are different. The first state is not "free", rather it is differently constrained from the second.

In essence what I would say is that if relatedness is central, then rather than focus on the insides of individuals we need to focus on the spaces between them.

SA: Readers of this interview are practising therapists. What can you tell us about what clinical effects your thinking has had on your work—individual and group therapy?

FD: This is hard for me to delineate at present. All I can say is that this way of thinking has many affinities with the intersubjectivists, and that it continues to erode the myth of the objective analyst that does not influence the processes in the consulting room—but only observes and interprets. Whether we like it or not, the therapist influences the patient in the way s/he speaks and what s/he says.

SA: Can we move on now to some of your ideas about what light your post-Foulkesian group theory throws upon issues of race and racism?

FD: In the main, psychoanalysis tends to explain the presence of racism in the world as the outcome of projection of some difficulty in the inner world of a particular individual. This then implies that the 'cure' for racism will be found within the psyches of individuals. This sort of explanation is not only apolitical but also asocial.

The notion of racism is predicated on an idea of race. At its most basic, a "race" is some sort of grouping. The question now is, on what basis has this grouping been formed? Where do the boundaries lie? Where does one group begin and another end? The racists of course would have us believe that these groupings are natural ones and their basis is in genetic code or some difference said to be provided by "nature". But of course there is no such basis for the differentiation of the so-called races. As Stephen Jay Gould demonstrated in his book *The Mismeasure of Man*, all the 19th and 20th Century attempts to measure and calibrate these differences came to nothing.

What we are left with instead is the fact that the so-called races are divided on the basis of colour, but in a peculiar way. Despite the fact that the colours of human kind vary on a continuous spectrum, and despite the fact that humans within designated races are not all coloured the same, we somehow manage the cognitive feat of perceiving the races as homogenous blocks of colour. To my mind it is no coincidence that the colour divides fall neatly onto the various coloniser-colonised divides.

What is becoming evident is that groups are not natural categories but are formed; further, power differentials play a critical role in the way these groups are formed. The construction of an "us" of necessity simultaneously constructs a "them". The question that we now have to ask of this process is why are the lines being drawn in these precise places and in these ways? The answers to these questions will reveal the workings of racism, the function of which is the maintenance of power differentials.

SA: You have said that language by its very nature cuts what is a process in such a way that it creates origin and causation.

FD: We are back at the idea of process reduction. All existence consists of infinite processes; but in order to engage with them we are obliged to break them up into bits and pieces—elements that are small enough to digest. These "bits and pieces" are the "states" that were previously

mentioned. Effectively, we have interrupted the infinite to create something finite. However, Elias says that we are prone to attributing to this place where we have made this interruption the status of an absolute beginning. We experience this beginning in a way that supposes that nothing has gone before it. If nothing comes before it, then this place is now experienced as the 'cause' of all that follows from it.

Complex multifaceted reality has been laid down in a linear sentence—a single line. For example, take the situation of a dysfunctional couple—one person drinks and the other nags. We could represent the situation by saying that the nagger *causes* the other to drink, or we could say that the drinker *causes* the nagger to nag. The point is that the order in which we describe the situation *creates* a cause. Thus the drinker might well make the nagger the cause of his/her drinking, saying in effect that the problem *begins* with the nagger; the drinker denies the existence of anything existing before this particular beginning—saying in effect that the “nagger” started it all. Presumably if one looked into this space before this apparent absolute beginning, then one would see processes in which the drinker would be found to be a little less innocent than s/he would have us believe.

SA: Can you say something about your notion that the unconscious is constantly being constituted?

FD: Odd as it might seem, we can begin to glean these mechanisms by visiting a shoe shop. The shop keeper tells us: there are more brown shoes than red ones.

Now, for this statement to be able to work, for it to be able to say something certain things need to be left unsaid, because if they were said, then meaning would be destroyed.

The statement has created two categories: red shoes and brown ones. The first thing that has to be rendered invisible are the connections between these groups—for example the fact that they are all shoes. If this connection is remembered, then there is the danger that the groups would collapse into each other. In effect, the difference between the two groups is emphasized, and the similarities are rendered invisible—one could say: made unconscious.

Now we can only ever meaningfully say a thing like 'the red shoes' by ignoring all the differences between the red shoes—the fact that some are brogues, some are stilettos, and so on. It is clear then that in order to say "the red shoes" what is being emphasized is the similarity, and what is rendered invisible are the differences within the category.

If we now step back from the whole thing we can see that at the level of the sentence, the parts have been homogenized (made the same), whilst the space between the parts has been heterogenized. In effect we have temporarily introduced two absolutes—an absolute difference between the parts and an absolute similarity within the parts.

We can say now that every sentence contains globules of homogeneity, which are connected by heterogeneity. To put it another way, sentences are globules of similarity in a sea of difference.

Identity, the act of naming a belonging, is a process similar to this. To say "we are group analysts", or "we are vegetarians", is to impose a homogeneity onto the named category. The heterogeneity within the category is annihilated. It has to be so for the sentence to work. And here is the thing: we could say that the internal differences are made unconscious, as are the external similarities. Thus all thought could be said to consist of a weaving together of islands of unconsciousness and consciousness.

What I am trying to describe here is how discourse structures thought—determining to some degree which aspects of experience are rendered conscious and which unconscious. This mechanism is actually the social unconscious at work.

SA: I'm beginning to get a feel for how stimulating your ideas could be for both psychoanalysis and sociology. This is psychoanalysis-*as-sociology*, and sociology-*as-psychoanalysis*. Thank you very much.