Psychotherapy and Politics International
Psychother. Politics. Int. 7(1): 34–39 (2009)
Published online in Wiley InterScience
(www.interscience.wiley.com) **DOI:** 10.1002/ppi.176

Special issue
Papers from the conference 'Psychotherapy and Liberation: The Legacy of May 68', which took place at the Institute of Group Analysis in London on 2–4 May 2008.

Class Relations and Individual Consciousness: A Neglected Dynamic in Analytic Group Therapy

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ABSTRACT *The author argues that class is an important but rarely acknowledged dynamic in analytic groups. She suggests that this, in part, reflects the dominant view in contemporary society that class is no longer an important aspect of social identity. This idea developed from a Weberian understanding of society as divided into many classes. She recommends the simplicity of a Marxist analysis of class as a relationship between those who hold economic power in society and those who do not. The author goes on to suggest why class is neglected as a dynamic in group analytic therapy. She suggests that, despite this neglect, class forms a significant aspect of analytic groups in clinical practice. She illustrates her argument with clinical examples. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: class, group analysis, ideology

Class relations permeate our conscious and unconscious worlds. Growing up in Western, industrialized society means we absorb beliefs, a way of viewing society and a view of human nature and the way human beings relate, all reflecting a class-based society. The whole way we look at things is determined by the dominant ideas of our society and remains so even when we have become aware of unstated assumptions in our thinking. These dominant ideas are present even when we struggle to think otherwise. They form the ideology of our society. Ideology is sometimes misunderstood to be a conscious, cynical propagation of beliefs in an attempt to dominate and control the masses. That may happen but ideology

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is something far subtler and more complex which affects us all in ways we can never become fully aware of. The ideology of our society – any society – goes largely unnoticed. It imbues the way we see the world, underpinned by rationalizations such as 'real-life' and 'common sense'. And it encourages us to dismiss other perspectives that run counter to this dominant way of seeing things as unrealistic, romantic or immature. There are theological parallels with the idea of prevenient grace, a concept designed to reconcile the perception of free will with a belief in an all-seeing and all-powerful creator (Theopedia: http://www.theopedia.com/Universal_prevenient_grace, accessed 7 November 2008).

The Marxist perspective regards class as a relationship based on an unequal, often unstable balance of power and authority. Power and authority are not identical. Authority can be personal or professional as well as class based. Authority is ceded, accorded or claimed; power is absolute. What distinguishes a class to the Marxist is its relationship to ownership and control of finance and property. As E. P Thompson says (Thompson, 1965) 'class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily'. Sociologists, drawing on the writings of Max Weber, have adopted a different understanding of class, elaborating on Marx's understanding of it to include ideas of status and lifestyle. Unfortunately, the core of Mark's understanding of class gets lost in the elaboration of 'classes' that this view allows. Greater clarity is achieved by thinking of what sociologists call classes as subclasses, or subgroups, in a society based on a central division between the few who 'have' and the vast majority who 'have not'.

Where then does this leave the 'middle classes'? Some of those who might be considered middle class are just as disenfranchised from economic and political power as manual workers, skilled or unskilled. Their different class identity is based on being 'mental' rather than manual workers. They can be considered as an important subgroup of the 'have nots'. Many sociological writers have tried to define what it is that distinguishes the professional middle classes from the working class. The most obvious distinction lies in the greater authority ascribed to, claimed and exercised, consciously and unconsciously, by professionals. This is precisely what recent governments have sought to undermine. Professionals such as doctors, psychologists or psychotherapists have authority in varying degrees but not power. In this respect they differ little from other 'have nots' although their allegiances are often muddled and may contradict their class interests. For a while, in the 1970s, radical therapists discussed whether their profession placed them in opposition to those they were trying to help. But the discussion confused skills, roles and professionalism with class and failed to consider adequately the place of professionals in class terms (Radical Therapist/Rough Times Collective, 1974). Nonetheless, the radical critique was based on an important understanding: although professionals struggle to work out their relationship to those who own and control property and finance they are often seen by the 'have nots' as being on the side of those who 'have'.

It is impossible for an individual to be classless. These days the dominant view – part of our society's ideology – is that classes have died out, withered away, and that individual class affiliations are irrelevant and old fashioned (Crook et al., 1992; Pakulski and Waters, 1996). This belief gained ground in the second half of the last century while at the same time social mobility was steadily decreasing and while class remained central to our society (Goldthorpe et al., 1967). The issue of class is complicated by this ideology of classlessness. Class identification in families is often confused but nonetheless still present and still based

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on power and authority. There are other inequalities in society with respect to power and authority: gender, ethnicity and age. Confusion on this subject supports the status quo.

One can be a member of a class as an individual but the term, the signifier, 'class' refers to a *group* experience. Power relations, communicated through language, structure the unconscious. Class relations permeate social experience and, as such, are reflected linguistically and absorbed unconsciously from an early age. The discourses of the 'haves' and 'have nots' are different. Psychotherapy uses the discourse of the 'haves' even though individual psychotherapists may consider themselves to be part of the 'have nots'. Our identity does not arise innocent of and unconnected from power relations in society. However, we have a sense of being uniquely independent in thought and, without careful reflection, fail to recognize the power relations we have internalized in growing up. Foulkes described this as part of our 'dynamic matrix' (Foulkes, 1971).

This self-misperception may, incidentally, be biologically important in supporting our quest for a mate beyond our own social group.

Although class is in essence a relationship between two groups, its major influence on the individuals in each group comes not during infancy when they are learning and negotiating their initial self and other, 'dyadic' relationships but at the stage, referred to as 'triadic', when three or more person relating is established. Jacques Lacan regarded this transition as the child's entry into society (Skelton, 1993). Classical Freudian thinkers refer to the transition from pre- to post-oedipal relating. However, the early dyadic, pre-oedipal experience of attachment should not be regarded as unaffected by class. Although the observation is not central to this argument, preoccupied and dismissive attachment styles may reflect effective, shared, class-based survival strategies in different environments posing different risks (Crittenden, 2000).

Classical, psychoanalytic theory came to downplay all aspects of social experience following Freud's formulation of the topographical model with its stress on inner experience. There is some correction of this emphasis in the structural model with mention of the 'external world' as one of the four agencies in the model but the inward-turning shift introduced by the topographical model (Sandler, 1997) continues to make it difficult for the psychoanalytically trained to allow adequately for social experience including class allegiance. Additionally, our Western, Cartesian tradition encourages us to think in terms of the individual rather than the group. We need to invert the assumption that the individual and individual experience comes first: as Farhad Dalal has suggested, first there is the group and only then the individual. Dalal's argument is that 'multiplicity has ontological priority over unity' (Dalal, 1998). When Margaret Thatcher said 'There is no such thing as society' (Thatcher, 1987) she was promoting an idea that was already part of our thinking; her remark is remembered because it 'made sense' of things to so many. Unwittingly, the predominant focus of psychoanalytic theory plays into this ideology, emphasizing the individual and, in so doing, often locating the source of individual distress not in class or subclass experience but in individual psychopathology. Many psychotherapists are aware of this difficulty but often struggle to hold it in mind.

Class identity and experience and, above all, class relations emerge in analytic groupwork but are seldom recognized. Although an edition of *Group Analysis* in 2002 was devoted to the subject, little else has been written about it (Craib, 2002). Group analytic practice is all about the recognition and tolerance of difference but class is the difference that is not spoken

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of. Class relations and class allegiance contribute to the matrix of any group and to the power relations and allegiances within it. Group analysis is the analysis of the group by the group, and that includes the group conductor (Foulkes, 1964). Much has been written about the authority of the conductor but almost entirely in tranferential terms. Of course, the conductor as 'mother' or 'father' – or at different times, both – is important. So is the individual and collective replaying and restructuring of internalized relationships from early experience. But, as Blackwell asks thoughtfully 'the concept of transference inherently problematizes all authority relationships. What is genuine or legitimate authority? What is transference?…What is class domination?…And in whose language is it going to be analysed?' (Blackwell, 2002).

The members of any analytic group grew up in a class-based society. Each was individually formed and influenced by allegiance to and perception of social class. Their relations with their original families are not the only group relations that they have internalized. The group conductor is regarded unconsciously not only as an authoritative parental replacement but also as an embodiment of class authority. As such the conductor embodies a group and not an individual. In explaining the group analytic concept of the matrix of a therapeutic group, Foulkes referred to the 'figure and ground' (Foulkes, 1990). There is a 'figure-and-ground' interplay between the experience of the conductor being seen as an individual and representing a class. It is difficult for group members to articulate this and uncomfortable for group analysts to think about it.

It is common early on in analytic groups for group members to enter a state of dependence in which they wait for the group conductor to illuminate their understanding with 'answers'. They hope that this will transform them into confident and competent persons. The group can struggle for months before this fantasy is gradually and reluctantly replaced by an awareness that answers come only from within. The sense of powerlessness and helplessness, which accompanies this fantasy, reflects not just imagined and remembered experiences from childhood but actual class relations between 'haves' and 'have nots'. This fantasy is revealed in group interactions. One patient used from time to time to refer, somewhat coyly, to the conductor of her group, as 'a top psychiatrist'. This description served to reassure her that she was in the hands of someone with power and authority. Despite several years in the group, this patient only really started to work in her therapy once she had decided to leave the group. Leaving was, for her, an act of both class and personal liberation.

Group analysts, like other therapists, try to respond to personal questions by turning them in the hope of exploring what the group imagines the response from the conductor might be. This often reveals fantasies of power and authority, sometimes embodying powerful projections. In one group session a woman referred to 'going shopping at Morrisons'. Another group member responded, saying 'Don't mention Morrisons! She [meaning the group conductor] won't know what you mean!' What could the group have imagined about their conductor's lifestyle? She obviously couldn't be expected to know about supermarkets. Perhaps she shopped by post, from Harrods? Or maybe she had a personal shopper or housekeeper to do her shopping? The conductor was painfully aware of being seen as someone from the boss class.

As a psychiatrist and an NHS consultant, this author has not found it easy even to get established, mature groups to talk freely about their class perceptions of her. When she

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raises the subject she encounters embarrassment or denial that the inescapable difference in authority is significant or relevant. Discussion flows more readily on the matter of her behaviour or skills and how group members feel about them. Even so, it is usually only positive feelings that get acknowledged – admiration and gratitude – rather than shame, envy or anger. This seems to reflect a strong, internalized prohibition against challenging the doctor, who must surely know best. Sometimes, discouragingly, group members say just that. In the small, north-eastern town where these groups take place and where the shipyards have been closed down and the collieries, abandoned doctors are regarded as belonging to the class that has the power to make such decisions.

It is scarcely easier to get group members to talk about class differences within the group. Often these are referred to obliquely, although sometimes exploring indirect references or a hunch on my part about what could be going on can be fruitful. In one established analytic group friction developed between two middle-aged men who shall be referred to as Andrew and Henry. Andrew had spoken in a session about going out one evening for 'tabs' and also about having to deal with local kids who were causing a nuisance on his estate. The following week Henry, who worked in a local call centre after being made redundant as a manager, suggested that we live in a classless society. Andrew said he didn't know *how* Henry could say that! Henry seemed flustered by Andrew snapping at him; he changed the subject. Andrew was sullen and uncharacteristically silent for the rest of the session. The following week Henry did not attend and Andrew grumbled bitterly about him being 'stuck up' and 'looking down on the likes of me'. When the conductor suggested that this could have to do with class, Andrew agreed, implying that he didn't think Henry really needed therapy – why had he been brought into the group in the first place? The bad feeling between the two men persisted for some months, rumbling underneath sessions and emerging periodically in an acid remark or a tense exchange. Other group members tried to get Andrew, who had been in the group much longer than Henry, to think about what might be going on but all he would say was that he didn't think Henry 'fitted in'. Eventually the long-running hostility flared up again. The conductor suggested that the two men needed to establish what it was they found difficult about each other and check out whether other group members felt similarly. Henry said that Andrew didn't seem to him to be helping himself. Other group members then filled him in on how much progress Andrew had made during the time he had been in the group. With encouragement, Andrew spoke in return about finding Henry superior. He said Henry talked in a 'lah de dah' voice and seemed to dismiss the difficulties Andrew had to cope with, living on a council estate and surviving on benefits. Colouring deeply, Henry reminded the group of his lifelong struggle to suppress a stammer that his father used to beat him for. He went on to talk about his family's working-class origins: his dad had been a fitter in the shipyards and had spent his life trying to better himself only to end up feeling isolated and socially excluded. Henry's words were spoken with feeling, which group members recognized and gently acknowledged as a breakthrough. There was a sense of relief in the room and the beginnings of an alliance between the two men, which gradually deepened. It seemed that some of Andrew's criticism of Henry might have been displaced unconsciously from the conductor to Henry. She suggested this but Andrew would not have it. He said she wasn't like the rest; she understood and didn't judge. She took it that he was comparing her to the many psychiatrists he had encountered during his long history of contact with the services. Some time later, after a

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period of painful depression, Andrew told the group how *his* father had been sent to public school but then had to leave when Andrew's grandfather died and the family could no longer afford the fees. Andrew went on to talk about his own school days and how the other boys who had been at school with him had done well and had gone on to professional jobs but he had just gone into the shipyards, learning a trade for which he was ill-suited because his family wasn't ambitious for him.

These clinical tales have been selected to illustrate the way class relations are ever present though seldom discussed in analytic groups. Class relations are so important for all of us that we assign social class at first sight or first hearing, although this is rarely acknowledged. Bearing, accent, interactive style and clothes give off subtle signals that are universally picked up, usually correctly. They have overtones of power and authority – or of the lack of it. It seems surprising that we can talk about awareness of and assumptions about power relations between the sexes, between different ethnic groups and between professions but find it hard to talk about class relations. The idea that we can rise above our class of origin and dispense with notions of social class is just as much part of the dominant ideology as the notion that there is now no such thing as class. Our therapeutic work could benefit from an increased awareness and further reflection on the important but unacknowledged dynamics of class relations.

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DOI: 10.1002/ppi