

Maintaining Group Analytic Training during the Financial Crisis in Greece

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ABSTRACT *This article describes the application of group analytic methods and principles to a training institution for group analysis, the Hellenic Organization for Psychotherapy and Education in Group Analysis (HOPE in GA), in Athens, Greece, when suffering from a decline in student numbers. By creating an on-going large group named “The Training Community” its members were able to deal effectively with the difficult financial and social situation. Speaking out through dialogue, frank communication, and working with the group dynamics and group processes in the organization gave members hope. They managed not only to survive but much more: HOPE in GA was able to become creative and to flourish despite the destructive forces in the wider social context both inside and outside the country. Group analysis creates political thought and can influence societies in a more humanitarian direction. Copyright © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

Key words: group analysis; training; large group; financial crisis; Greece

Since 2010 Greece has been experiencing austerity measures, partly due to the extended financial crisis all over the European Union. The consequences are, naturally, not only socioeconomic but also psychological, and inevitably have severe implications both for society and in psychotherapy.

Twenty years before the emergence of the financial crisis, Greece had achieved substantial economic development but by 2007 the Gross National Product (GNP) was close to zero growth with negative growth rates by the end of 2008. A period of recession followed with a cumulative drop of 20.8% in GNP (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2012) over the next four years. By 2009 this immense fiscal deficit left Greece in a position where it could no longer borrow money from the “free” market at preferential interest rates and so the Greek government was forced to turn to European Community member states (EU), the European Union Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), “the Troika”, to borrow money with better terms and conditions in order to avoid defaulting on previous loans. In 2010 Greece signed a memorandum with the EU and the IMF for a preliminary loan of €110 billion. In this way the Troika entered into Greece’s everyday life. Representatives of the Troika visited Greece on a quarterly basis to assess progress in implementing the austerity programme which had been agreed upon when the loan was taken out.

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Over the last six years, three different governments have been elected with four different Prime Ministers. The political scene has changed rapidly creating, in turn, insecurity and hope. A new government was elected in January 2015, the first left government ever in Greece. The EU gave Greece four months to present a new programme to deal with the debt and the humanitarian crisis. These, after all, were the new government's pre-electoral commitments and they played an important role in winning the elections.

CONSEQUENCES

The consequences of the continuing financial crisis occurred on two levels: socioeconomic and psychological. On the socioeconomic level the measures employed included reducing salaries in the public sector, reducing state pensions, changing work conditions in both the public and private sectors, closing down or merging organizations and companies in the public sector, and increasing direct and indirect taxation. All of these resulted in a dramatic reduction in the buying power of the consumer.

On a socialpolitical level it is worth noting the increased support for a far-right political party named Golden Dawn which has an openly fascist ideology. It is against immigrants, homosexuals, etc. to the extent that some of its members have been convicted for the murders of immigrants and opposing party members. During the last election Golden Dawn finished third: an increase that can be explained by the financial pressures experienced by a significant proportion of the population. On 31 December 2014 the unemployment rate was 26.1% and, for those aged under 24, it was 56.7% (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2015). This resulted in the emergence of the so-called Generation G, 200,000 young scientists, most in postgraduate studies, emigrating around the world to find jobs. Furthermore, three million people (27.7% of the population) were reported to be at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The number of homeless people increased by almost 60% from 2009 to 2011 when it was estimated that 20,000 people were homeless and receiving food and supplies from non-governmental organizations and community agencies. This situation continues today.

This hard financial reality directly influenced the psychological wellbeing of the population: difficult feelings became more intense; people became more pessimistic about the future, more likely to express sorrow, anxiety, and anger; and suicide rates continue to increase. In 2011, 477 suicides were reported; 393 were men, the highest ever recorded in Greece. With restrictions and austerity measures imposed on the National Health Service, the increase in suicide rates may be a result of reduced health services as well as reduced personal income (Kantounis, 2014). Rates of depression have also increased during the past five years. A study run by the Athens University Research Institute for Mental Health (Economou, Peppou, Louki, Komporozos, Mellou, & Stefanis, 2012), analysing data from a help line for depression between 2008 and 2011, indicated a significant increase, from 1.8% to 28.7%, in people who reported a direct connection between their financial difficulties and the onset of their symptoms.

THE CRISIS AND GROUP ANALYTIC TRAINING: THE SITUATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

Although my intention was to present the variations in the number of trainees in all four group analytic training institutions in Greece over recent years, this was not feasible as only two of

the four institutions replied to my request for statistical data. Of these two, only one gave me any data. The other refused as they had objections about collecting the data and correlating it with the financial crisis. I am aware that many variables and factors can explain data and my intention was to show how the current situation might have affected the numbers of trainees, free from further interpretations. In the end I was only able to collect data from HOPE in GA, the institution that I represent.

This data showed that applications from students wishing to train at Hope in GA dropped by 26% after the onset of the crisis (2009/2010). A similar number of students graduated during the crisis as before the crisis and the same number of students dropped out during the crisis as before. I found significant differences in the attitude and intention of dropouts before and after the crisis; those who left after the financial crisis either emigrated or turned to different training courses that better fitted their current needs whereas those who left before discontinued their training in order to pursue other work. Most importantly, the majority who left after the crisis, as far as I know, continued with personal therapy.

EFFECTS ON TRAINERS

In 2014 Kantounis reported on the impact of the socio-economic crisis on burn-out among group analysts (Kantounis, 2014) using the method of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The sample included trainers at HOPE in GA: a total of six people, three men and three women, all of whom also worked in private practice. The trainers/therapists reported that they experienced additional stress at this time as they had to face the sudden departure of many group members, either because they had lost their jobs and/or because they had to emigrate to find work. Which departures could be attributed to resistance to therapy and which to the hard financial reality was hard to determine. It seems that the remaining group members felt abandoned, placing more pressure on the therapists. In addition, therapists' incomes dropped suddenly at this time due to lower group numbers. Additionally, they faced similar stresses in their private practices.

The trainers/group analysts reported feeling agony, uncertainty, lack of control, and anger, along with empathy and a sense of responsibility for their work. Their concern about their clients (patients and trainees) seems to have protected them from being defeated by the crisis and kept them in tune with their role as therapists and trainers. Also, offering discounts to their clients gave them a feeling of solidarity with their society; they talked about contributing to society by being psychotherapists which gave existential meaning to what they were doing. Their commitment to the therapist/trainer role worked as a protective shield for their psychological wellbeing as it counterbalanced threats and inconveniences that the crisis produced. It seems that working as a therapist was also experienced as healing.

Kantounis (2014) concluded that there was probably an absence of burn-out syndrome among the trainers/therapists because they were able to find flexible, creative ways of coping (especially through engagement with art), while believing in the importance to society of their role. They were found to be able to take care of their own psychological wellbeing.

EFFECTS ON TRAINEES

In 2014 Kavvadia researched the experiences of freshly qualified group analysts when starting their first group (Kavvadia, 2014). These analysts had all been trainees during the financial crisis.

Using the IPA methodology, Kavvadia's research explored the identity of the beginning group analyst, particularly in relation to the therapeutic analytic group and the group analytic training.

Participants in this research seemed to turn to take care of themselves and ease painful feelings in their own analysis but, at the end of their training, they found it difficult to say goodbye to the support of both their therapeutic group and the extended therapy they had experienced during training. At the same time they felt guilty because they needed therapy as "patients" and did not feel mature enough as professionals. On completing their training they experienced fear and anxiety. They also wanted extra support from the training institute (group supervision, referrals for members in order to start a group, professional cooperation in projects) to help them with feelings of isolation in their private practice. They were afraid that their ability to conduct groups would not be good enough if they continued to remain for too long without a group of their own; as if their group self was at risk.

Kavvadia (2014) concluded that trainers should do more work in therapeutic groups to help fresh professionals to internalize the group as a concept. Social circumstances have changed and the situation in Greece has made it much harder for beginning group analysts to launch themselves. A longer personal analysis may be appropriate in order to face this difficult reality.

ONE REACTION TO THE CRISIS: HOPE IN GA CREATES A TRAINING COMMUNITY

In mid-2011, one year after the onset of the financial crisis, trainees started to complain about the high training fees. Trainees could not fulfill their obligations to the institution as their increasing debts were forcing them to temporarily interrupt their training or only partially participate in the course in order to reduce the level of fees. This resulted in the size of the introductory seminar being reduced. In addition, a number of applicants did not finally attend the training course.

Initially HOPE in GA held back and waited for further reaction but debates soon emerged among committee members about what to do. Some did not want to reduce the fees fearing that the course would be downgraded or devalued. They viewed the trainees' requests as resistance and suggested that this was something that should be addressed in a student's personal therapy. Their view was: "As trainees we invested money and soon got our money back as professionals. This is what has to be done now". For these committee members, the ability to pay the high fees was linked to motivation. Others felt that we had to reduce the fees as a response to the real social circumstances.

CREATION OF THE VOLUNTARY GROUP FOR ACTION IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

In this situation of waiting and debating, the trainees took action. Initially under the supervision of a member of the training committee, Apostolos Angelopoulos, the students formed a group of volunteers to offer support and social action within the local community. They contacted municipal public health organizations and offered group analytic psychotherapy, thereby creating an opportunity to do clinical work as trainees and present appropriate material for supervision.

I interviewed the initiators of the voluntary group, two trainees who are now in the last year of their training. They remembered that their main motivation in 2011 was to get clinical material for supervision. One of them stressed that the introductory seminar course that provided trainees with

groups for supervision kept dropping in numbers due to the financial crisis. “I understood that training without clinical material is incomplete (imperfect)”. This trainee made an announcement to HOPE in GA and eight trainees formed this voluntary group. They started meeting once in a while as a leaderless group, sometimes with the voluntary supervision of a trainer. My interviewee reported that this group saw the financial crisis as creating an opportunity for HOPE in GA to open up to the local community. It, therefore, offered to conduct groups on a voluntary basis. After some hesitation from local agencies, the local club for the elderly accepted their invitation and they ran a regular, closed, seminar-based group for one year. The members of the group were very excited and embraced the volunteers.

The voluntary group met for about two and a half years until 2013. When I interviewed the initiators of the group, they said that the experience was very important for their training and that it developed cohesion and strong relationships between them. They also explained that they felt ambivalence from HOPE in GA regarding their initiative. They noted that some trainers were supportive while others did not show any interest, appearing to be puzzled about the initiative. The interviewees recalled that HOPE in GA reinforced positive, independent thinking and action, and certainly the group was allowed to use the building for the meetings. After one year, this work stopped and the trainees found regular daytime jobs which provided appropriate clinical material as there was pressure on their professional time. They realized that many members of HOPE in GA, both new and more experienced, were now involved in voluntary community work, and their interest in the group diminished.

Most importantly, trainees compiled and posted a written request to the training committee asking for amendments to the tuition fees due to reductions in their incomes. They stressed that after all the effort they had put into the training they did not want to drop out due to financial difficulties. Out of the three training programmes, nine of the 17 trainees signed the petition, a percentage too large to ignore. Initially a small discount was given as a goodwill gesture. In addition, an external supervisor, Christer Sandhal, was called in to help investigate the dynamics and practical issues facing the organization.

The presence of Christer Sandhal, a Swedish group analyst with great experience in organizational issues, was catalytic. Through group processes such as experiential workshops differences were bridged, conflicts were avoided, tensions were eased, intentions were clarified, and we realized that we were all on the same side. Our common wish and will was the survival of the organization as well as the promotion of group analysis for individuals, the organization, and society.

At the same time, the need for a space for dialogue on a frequent and regular basis became evident. A large group, called The Training Community was therefore initiated. This replaced an existing group that met twice a year. The new group, conducted by a guest group analyst, started every two months. Initially, having an external conductor ensured that boundaries would be kept within the organization. Now, 10 years since the inception of HOPE in GA, we have reached a point of maturity that permits “inner conducting” of the group. All members of the organization can participate; whether they are founding members, trainees or graduates of any of the training programmes. The group still meets every two months except for the summer holiday period. The head of training and president of HOPE in GA, Margarita Kritikou, suggested that the group might be conducted on rotation with members of the training committee taking turns. This group in the revised form has now run for two years and it is intended that it will continue to meet for the foreseeable future. The group has achieved remarkable results regarding the organization’s functioning.

On a financial level, it was realized that tuition fees should be reduced by a further 10%, including the fees for group participation in the introductory seminar. A 40% reduction has now been applied to the cost of the introductory seminar. Finally, this year a series of fee-free and open to the public lectures has been offered and all experiential workshops are offered at a very low cost.

THEORETICAL LINKS TO THE PHENOMENA

Where does group analysis meet the social context? I believe in the theory of median and large groups and their application to organizations. The median group, being smaller than a large group and larger than a small group, provides a familiar yet community-sized context where everybody usually finds it possible to have a voice. This works well as an on-going operational group for professionals in educational settings, in operational teams or work groups. In terms of process and size, the median group is able to create a definable cultural context of its own that does not transfer some of the dynamics that emerge in smaller groups. In these larger group analytic contexts people learn to participate and communicate. As Thompson (1999) wrote: "Listening and talking, openly, carefully, thoughtfully, mindfully, responsively, each one trying to find and establish an authentic personal voice, is something that can be learnt through participation in the development of open communication in the larger group" (pp. 127–129).

As in the example, HOPE in GA had two subgroups, one comprising trainers, the other trainees, trying to deal with the background financial crisis that was emerging in the wider social context. The Training Community as a median to large group was concerned with the discovery, exploration, and resolution of tensions, not only at the intra-personal and inter-personal level but mostly between these two subgroups. This is what groups of this size can facilitate. The larger the setting the more the focus is on relationships with the wider society. When personal problems do come to the fore in these groups they are likely to be connected with emotional disorders resulting from social disturbance. As Foulkes suggested (as cited in Thompson, 1999), people may be brought together to form a median group as a problem-solving unit, maintaining a focus on the difficulties in their relationships with the wider context. This is very close to the first of the three types of large analytic group Foulkes distinguished: the problem-centred large group in which the whole group functions as a problem-solving unit. He described this as social-therapy rather than psychotherapy because the focus is on difficulties with which all members are concerned, not individual problems. After two years, the Training Community group of HOPE in GA has slowly transformed into the third type of group described by Foulkes: the therapy-centred large group which is free to investigate all aspects of group activity in the on-going situation including unconscious, disguised, and symbolic meanings (as cited in Thompson, 1999).

In her description of catastrophic phenomena experienced during the war in the former Yugoslavia being transferred into group analytic settings, Mojovic (2007) stressed how a difficult post-totalitarian social context can influence the group analytic matrix. She observed the activation of psychotic defences in individuals, groups, and institutions, and described how group analytic work (in every size of group) helped Serbians give up a catastrophic attitude by sharing and analysing group phenomena. When they began their training in Serbia, the group analytic trainees were supported by trainers from England. After the war began in the Balkans, one trainer continued to come to Serbia by driving through war zones. His devotion and struggle to reach Serbia, as well as the group matrix of the training course, functioned, according to

object relations theory, as good objects for the trainees in the midst of a catastrophic and chaotic situation. This deep caring was internalized so that Serbian colleagues were able later to resist the pressure that originated from group projections.

In discussing acting-out in training institutions, Kritikou (2014) stressed the importance of the social context and the form of leadership. Acting-out increases where boundaries are confused and leadership is inadequate or rigid. In a traumatized society the state and the politicians' attitudes and behaviour provoke violent enactments, humiliation, suicides, revolutions, murders, etc. She suggested that repetitive, unchallenged acting-out reflects the chaos and destructiveness of societal and group networks. She expressed the hopes that the Greek culture and family networks would keep values, strength, and hope alive.

Kritikou (2014) stressed the importance of mature, rational leadership in society and in groups. Keeping in mind the Greek political scene, she argued that the most important element of this leadership is the ability and willingness to maintain ethical codes and to resist corruption and complicity. The leader in group analytic contexts should also be able to take the role of citizen and give meaning to this role as discussed below. After all, although we are either trainers, therapists, trainees or patients we all struggle to reach maturity by developing the capacity to work, to love, and to function as citizens.

De Maré's work clearly indicated the link between group analysis and the social context. He suggested that large groups provide a setting for exploring the social unconscious; they can become the bridge between the individual self and the mind on the one hand and the socio-cultural environment or the social context on the other. This happens not only as citizens who adjust to society but also makes it possible for society to adjust to us, the community of group analysts (as cited in Thompson, 1999).

De Maré also explained that members of large groups can experience a threat to consciousness and to thought so behave with primitive responses. He suggested that mindless behaviour that appears in large groups reflects the mindlessness of the social context outside the group. The ground is ready for inflexible social attitudes and intransigent social phenomena. Participation in larger groups enables an examination of the context that lies outside of the family context and ideally builds the capacity to restore mindfulness (as cited in Thompson, 1999).

According to De Maré (as cited in Thompson, 1999), the large group and society have structural similarities. Wider society can also be dominated by split-off projections that, without intervention, can lead to a culture that is inappropriate, out of date, unresponsive to current needs, and difficult to change. He argued that two key concepts which enable change through large group process come from the Greek, "dialogue" and "koinonia". Dialogue means the free lateral discourse that appears in a large group while koinonia is the impersonal fellowship that can develop in a large group when dialogue has been established. He wrote: "a form of togetherness and amity that brings a pooling of resources" (as cited in de Maré, Piper, & Thompson, 1991, p. 2). In other words it is this capacity that makes us able to engage in society and with our fellows; the capacity that powers citizenship.

Frustration and hate are the initial, automatic responses of participants in large groups. Hate and aggression arise as the result of frustration due to lack of instinctual satisfaction. The large group provides a setting where hate can be experienced, confronted, addressed, and transformed, so the development of dialogue is crucial. Dialogue in large groups diminishes the malign consequences of splitting, projection, and an inability to find and voice one's own thoughts. Hate is finally replaced by koinonia in a well-functioning large group. The powerful energy generated by hate

is used in the service of thinking in order to transform it into fruitful process for elaboration and further dialogue (De Maré, as cited in Thompson, 1999).

DISCUSSION

According to group analytic theory, the therapeutic factors of the group reside in the group-as-a-whole and not solely on the conductor (for example, see Foulkes, 1964). Our Training Community was formed as an answer to the trainees' requests for further support. It enhanced a sense of belonging and helped us establish a culture that promoted free exploration of the underlying dynamics based on open and frank dialogue. The group members moved from a paranoid position to the depressive position, to use Kleinian terminology. Anxiety, panic, and frustration transferred from the Greek society and brought into our relationships in HOPE in GA were not evaded or suppressed but, rather, transformed through dialogue. Individuals and subgroups have been integrated into the larger group which functioned as a container, giving its members the opportunity to handle and elaborate anxiety, thus avoiding projections and splitting. In other words, the group has been able to provide a healthy space to contain and elaborate the traumatic experiences caused by the financial, social, and humanitarian crisis. Rotating the conducting of the group amongst the six members of the educational committee created a more democratic, group-centred space, helping avoid scapegoating.

It is worth mentioning that throughout the difficulties and anxieties resulting from the financial/humanitarian crisis, all the creative instincts elaborated by group analytic theory have emerged and been reinforced. At the same time, all anti-group forces that give rise to paranoid thinking and fantasies of disaster and annihilation were disarmed even though such forces acted and still act within Greek society.

Greek social reality can be also interpreted in terms of object relations theory: a manic defensive position, in the form of irrational spending secured by bank loans and false welfare, led to a sudden reality confrontation where dreams were brutally shattered, leaving people devastated and desperate. This brutal landing resulted in alarmingly increased suicide attempts.

The financial crisis and the procedures that took place inside HOPE in GA helped the institution to develop administratively. We succeeded in changing the articles of association two years ago, clarifying our intention to act with integrity and enabling better functioning with a more democratic spirit.

Group analysis creates political thought. In 2011, we had two options, to simply react to what was happening socially or to activate democratic, group analytic processes that would take the organization further. In 2012, the organization had no applications from potential trainees but within two years the number of applicants stood at 10. HOPE in GA strives to cultivate extraversion. The organization's members keep developing personally and professionally: by creating groups in private and communal settings, by researching and lecturing on group analysis and its phenomena, by participating in global organizations, and by participating in many settings, local, communal or social, as volunteers.

CONCLUSION

Since my childhood I have confronted controversial ethical issues. Peace, humanity, and brotherhood are virtues I have been seeking as a person, as a responsible citizen, and as a capable

group analyst. At the same time, there have always been people who stood against these virtues, who I perceived as opponents. Growing up I realized that the world is not ideal. Group analysis in Greece has been forced to completely adjust to Greek society and reality.

Greece is the only country in the European Group Analytic Training Institutions Network (EGATIN) that has three institutional members, all in Athens. I wonder now whether Greece (or the Balkans) has made herself available to projections from the outside that has resulted in excessive splitting or whether splitting has always been a characteristic of Greek society?

Trainees learn from the trainers at HOPE in GA but, of course, the trainers also learn from the trainees. I am proud of being a member of HOPE in GA because we are open to listening and learning. We are open to discussing and working together in difficult social situations.

I am also proud of being Greek. Our history taught me to try for the best, despite inner conflicts and outer threats. I think that there is ground for communication among Greek group analysts. If every training institute examines itself and identifies projections, projective identifications, and splitting it will function more maturely. This is one proposition. The other is respectful dialogue. Willingness to participate presupposes internal maturity. EGATIN as a “neutral” space could become an initial bridge for different group analytic institutes to examine differences and common features. Group analytic principles could positively influence societies, provide them with tools to achieve wellbeing, and transmit the hope of forming a more humanitarian society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was originally presented at the European Group Analytic Training Institutions Network study days in Bristol, UK on 25 April 2015.

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