

# CLASSICAL GREEK "KOINONIA," THE PSYCHOANALYTIC MEDIAN GROUP, AND THE LARGE PERSON-CENTERED COMMUNITY GROUP: DIALOGUE IN THREE DEMOCRATIC CONTEXTS

*Kristin Sturdevant*  
*The University of Iowa*

## BACKGROUND

Since participating for the first time in an Annual Conference of The Association for the Development of the Person-Centered Approach in 1991, I have become increasingly attuned to the controversy surrounding issues of leadership in the Annual ADPCA Conferences. In 1992, I conducted a pilot survey at the Annual Conference, addressing two concerns – "What does it mean to be intentional? And if we agree about what it means, what might we legitimately expect when we participate in a large, person-centered community group?"

More than half of the respondents in the survey did not feel that their expectations with regard to empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness—the cornerstones of the person-centered approach—were met (Sturdevant, 1994). This supported Newton's observation that "... many newcomers are confused, frightened, and find valueless our ADPCA meetings when they are exposed to a structure which is mysterious ... Most ... do not return." (1994) This was of concern to me, because I regard the person-centered way-of-being, and potentials of the large community so highly as a context in which humans can experience acceptance and community.

In my study, responses to questions with respect to intentionality were more tentative than were those with respect to expectations, suggesting that intentionality might operate at an implicit level. The task appeared to be that of explicitly offering the three conditions. In other words, if we intend to provide the facilitative conditions, our risk is to do it. If participants expect to be met with the facilitative conditions, we – particularly those who have had more experience in large PCA groups in this 'way of being' – have a responsibility to try to provide them. The problem seemed to be salient, and also to point to the question of responsibility, a tricky subject since the person-centered approach is generally regarded as non-directive and the question of whose responsibility it is to provide the conditions implicit.

To delve more deeply into questions of community, dialogue, and responsibility, I referred to a book entitled, *Koinonia: From Hate Through Dialogue in the Large Group* (de Mare, Piper,

& Thompson, 1991). *Koinonia* describes dialogue in two democratic group contexts, first as individuals participated in Greek democratic forums, and then in psychoanalytic groups as developed by Foulkes in 1944. I have divided this paper into several parts, including an Introduction, A Prototype: The Greek Democratic Forum, Foulkes' Psychoanalytic Median Groups, Large Person-Centered Community Groups, A Comparison of Group Cultures, a Conclusion, and a Postscript.

Note: de Mare and his associates found that a medium-sized ("median") group of 20 members provided the best culture for dialogue. Groups ranging in size from 100-500 have also worked, but larger groups (1,000-2,000) may be less productive, including fewer in dialogue.

## INTRODUCTION

(*Koinonia* . . . is about an operational approach to dialogue, culture, and the human mind, through the medium of the large group context). (de Mare, Piper, & Thompson, 1991, p. 3)

As I read *Koinonia*, I was intrigued by explicit references to processes which took place in psychoanalytic groups and appeared to share features with classical Greek democratic forums and large person-centered groups. Were there, perhaps, a cluster of necessary conditions in large groups that applied across each of these models? Salient words in the book led me to definitions, and sometimes word origins, in original texts and in the dictionary on a search. This was a fruitful and fascinating expedition. I have included origins and definitions of words which I felt were particularly relevant in exploring group features and drawing inferences regarding concepts shared across groups. In this paper, I have marked these words, such as "koinonia,"\* with an asterisk, and listed them alphabetically in the Glossary at the end of this paper. I encourage you to refer to the Glossary for a sociocultural feast!

The assumption guiding my reading was that "dialogue"\* is the common means by which we build, maintain, and grow in our social cultures. Through dialogue we share our constructions of meaning and reality. *Dialogue in the large group is more likely to occur when our good faith intentions are to understand ourselves and the other group participants – and to express our intentions.* (All italics in this paper are mine.) When we do so, we are more likely to be able to experience shared reality—the ground of being in fellowship – "koinonia." We find a prototype of the large group in the classical Greek democratic forum.

## A PROTOTYPE: THE GREEK DEMOCRATIC FORUM

Greek democratic forums were held during what we know as the classical Greek period (495 BC-322 BC). Greek "culture"\* was based on the concept of "koinonia."

People who lived in different areas of Greece often spoke a common dialect, "koine" (coin-ay), described by de Mare, et al. as " . . . a sort of carthorse of a language belonging to everybody because it belonged to nobody" (1991, p. 1). People speaking "koine" would gather periodically to speak, listen, see, and think in a "democratic"\* manner. Participants of groups as large as 2,000 sat facing each other – in circular formation – which facilitated addressing issues, making decisions, and cooperatively pooling resources as they treated each other as equals and with respect.

Two types of modern day large groups – Psychoanalytic Groups and Large Person-Centered Community Groups – reveal that the human search for self-definition, an understanding of others, and reaching intersubjective agreement continues. Let us look at structure and process in these two modern group contexts.

## FOULKES' PSYCHOANALYTIC GROUPS

In 1944, Dr. S.H. Foulkes introduced small group psychotherapy at Northfield Military Hospital, founding it on the concept that "... group therapy is an altogether desirable contribution to people's education as responsible citizens\*" (Foulkes in de Mare, et al., 1991, p. 11). In 1952, Dr. P. de Mare joined with Foulkes in organizing the Group Analytic Society. Their objectives were to create a forum for people interested in large groups to obtain training in applying large group concepts to other settings, and *to support, inform, and provide experiential training learning opportunities for prospective group "conveners."*

Later de Mare articulated the challenge of beginning groups as learning "how to think" (de Mare, 1972 in de Mare et al., 1991). Feeling might precede or integrate with thought; it could not supplant it. Group sessions were to provide a context which would encourage members to conceptualize, articulate, and work through apparent differences within the group: "Thoughtfulness is a slow process; it is citizenship in the making!" (de Mare, et al., 1991, p. 91)

In 1987, de Mare acted as the convener in large group discussions at a conference held through the Center of International Affairs at Harvard University. This format,

... allowed people to free-associate in an unstructured egalitarian environment approximating the Greek ideal of *Koinonia* – fellowship. The discussion impelled participants to think in abstract terms, to listen and talk with one another, and get to know each other as individuals. Its goal was to transcend the limitations of everyday conversation, with all the inhibition, conformity, and repression that it involves, to go beyond a series of monologues to a general dialogue. (Kibble in de Mare, et al., 1991, p. xvi)

Patterns emerged in the larger psychoanalytic groups which de Mare continued to convene. Members initially felt alienated (anomie\*), anxious\*, and frustrated. Frustration\* led to feelings of hatred; the eruption of "hate"\* signaled progress, "squeezing" or propelling individuals into dialogue – out of a first culture\* (a bioculture, in which the libido is frustrated), into a second culture (a socioculture, in which the libido is socialized), leading to a third culture (an idioculture, in which meaning is discerned, and the individual humanized and increasingly concerned with the social whole.) According to de Mare, et al., "... dialogue must continue as long as it fails to handle hate" (1991).

Individuals' feelings transformed through dialogue: as they entered into awareness, they became able to exercise "outsight"\* – thinking soundly from an other-centered point-of-view. In exercising *outsight*, participants oriented themselves to self and others in the "excluded middle" ground. This was an implicit, interpersonal free space, conceptually similar to D.W. Winnicott's (1953) concept of "potential space" – the psychophysiological space between individuals where we "make meaning" and form values. It is the existential ground of shared external reality. (I may, for example, experience this "excluded middle" space when I engage in dialogue with someone, understand and am understood by him/her; the "potential space" has been for us a "common ground," now replete with meaning).

Dialogue helped individuals understand what others found meaningful, which helped them understand each other better. This culture of fellowship depended upon the coordination of the intentions and expectations of the speaker and the suppositions and expectations of the listeners. The group process led members on a path through the discomfort of anonymity, libidinal fantasizing, anxiety, frustration, and hate into community as members engaged in dialogue. Dialogue was the process by means of which individuals grew from "infans"\* – literally, the inability to speak, to be able to voice thoughts, make the self known, and "name the world" (de

Mare, et al., 1991, p. 30). Each member acquired a voice, and, as in classical Greece, *with a voice, a vote*.

As members increasingly found their voices, dialogue developed in the large group by means of reflective responses from others ("polylogue"\*), and *a structure formed, requiring members to assume responsibilities and duties, and granting them rights. A culture of fellowship depended upon effective dialogue—upon the coordination of the intentions and expectations of speaker and listener.*

The italicized portions indicate concepts that may be particularly relevant in articulating parallel processes and situations in large person-centered groups, to which I will now turn.

### LARGE PERSON-CENTERED COMMUNITY GROUPS

In composition, processes, and goals, large person-centered groups (from roughly 50-200 participants) is, at heart, democratic. Based on the theories and methods of Carl Rogers, the person-centered group model is grounded in a belief in the potential of individuals to develop into mindful\*, fully-functioning\* persons. The goal in person-centered groups is to provide conditions for individual and group growth based on, "... a learning that is experiential as well as cognitive" (Rogers, 1987, p. 39). As in Greek forums and psychoanalytic groups, given certain conditions, a culture ("cultura"\* ) forms and, "We must create a climate, engage in behaviors which reflect such a facilitative climate, if we are to change and grow, and if we are to enable the other to change and grow" (Rogers, 1993, p. 4).

Within this culture, certain conditions are given. There is an implicit expectation that members will be "authentic,"\* "congruent,"\* will accept others with unconditional positive regard—openly and without judgment—and will work together in the group "context." The large person-centered community group optimally provides these conditions for changes in individual self-structure and leads to a group culture in which concerns become centered on the needs of the entire community. *Insight leading to insight.*

Fully-functioning groups and fully-functioning individuals are isomorphic, sharing aspects of structure and process. They share the natural ability of organisms to self-regulate—to find their way. Group process, like individual process, requires openness to the present ("ananke"\*), adaptability, and the ability to exercise divergent thinking ("eutropelia"\*). There is the implicit faith that fully-functioning groups will emerge through change, *as the group itself feels, reflects upon feelings, and expresses them, with an attitude embracing the three conditions.*

Drawing from systems theory, group experience in the present requires organic flexibility, semipermeable interpersonal psychic boundaries to facilitate information flow, and an ability to deal with conflict. Face-to-face contact fosters dynamic intersubjective sharing and understanding, optimally leading to full-functioning and growth. Such contact lets individuals see different perspectives and more possibilities. Recognizing conflict and verbally acknowledging it requires acceptance, active listening, and "empathy."\* "Frustration"\* may pervade initial large person-centered community groups: working through frustration requires the risk of involvement and open responsiveness. Genuineness, another facilitation condition, demands creative, constructive problem-solving, following a path of emotions informed by reflection, and shared in dialogue.

Most person-centered groups emphasize phenomenological experiencing in the ongoing group. To facilitate this, participants sit in (an approximation of) a circle to promote dialogue and process. A range of feelings and inner nudgings motivate group members to interact in order to satisfy its natural tendency to become a self-regulating community. Based on the assumption that the core of the group, as the core of the individual, is constructive, "... if you can get to know

the person inside, you will find that the person would like to live in harmony and is constructive by nature. And that is the essential basis of the whole theory and model. . ." (Rogers, 1987, p. 41).

## A COMPARISON OF GROUP CULTURES

The Greek model of democracy, the psychoanalytic group, and the large person-centered community group bear several similarities. Individuals gather to engage in dialogue to let their needs and opinions be known and to solve sometimes mutual or shared problems. Members sit in circular formation, facilitating face-to-face communication. Dialogue is the common means for communicating individual and community needs and wants.

Psychoanalytic and large person-centered community groups attend to both intrapersonal and interpersonal concerns. Dialogue builds community. Conflict, whether it takes the form of hate or grief can be, indeed must be, to some extent present; dialogue provides the continuity necessary for progressing through troubled waters to build community. Flexible structure seems important in order to accommodate and contain differences. Optimally, every present member, is valued and treated with respect and equality.

Also optimally, dialogue must be authentic. Greek democracy began to deteriorate when participants in democratic forums departed in major ways from formative ideals. In particular, demagogic and rhetorical speaking replaced genuine, egalitarian dialogue. Some participants found themselves ostracized, and the organization of the forum became progressively lax. Women, slaves, and foreigners were excluded, and one might speculate that their exclusion, from the very beginning, deprived the democratic forum of necessary and invaluable participants, limited possibilities, and foreshadowed the demise of classical Greek democracy from the very start.

The achievements of classical Greek democracy inform us of potentials inherent in human culture; we may also benefit by recognizing its shortcomings and mistakes so that we do not repeat them. The psychoanalytic median group and the large, person-centered community group provide us with models of a more inclusive, truly democratic culture in which differences are a fuel for dialogue. Each model suggests sources of human social difficulty and means of remediation through dialogue and peaceable confrontation.

Dealing with frustration through dialogue may lead to growth and understanding. The circular seating arrangement in each of the group formats discussed here provides a setting which explicitly fosters equal participation by members. Respectful attention and listening and face-to-face dialogue facilitate the democratic ideal – the invitation to each member to share in the work of the group. Large person-centered groups share with psychoanalytic groups the objective of giving careful thought to issues, fostering member responsibility for self and the group.

Carl Rogers identified what he termed "necessary and sufficient conditions" for individual and group organisms to grow to full-functioning. The three forms of democratic group culture discussed in this paper vary in their *explicit* attention to these conditions. In Greek forums none of these conditions is distinguished, although we may assume that some degree of each of the conditions must have been present for the forums to have functioned at all. The glaring exception to this is the disregard, indeed, exclusion of much of the population. Given the exclusion of members of the community-at-large, Greek forums may be considered democratic but bounded. Some voices were not just still, they were absent.

An intriguing possibility appears when psychoanalytic groups and large person-centered groups are compared on the dimensions of "outsight" and "empathy." According to Rogers,

Really sensitive, empathic understanding is when you understand without judging, when you understand what it is like to live in the world of this other person. This is something that is so rare that it is really very precious. It ought to be regarded as we regard our precious gems and precious metals, because it is something very rare in this world. And it has an enormously releasing effect. (1987, p. 41)

In psychoanalytic groups, the concept of "outsight" seems similar to "empathy." It operates on an implicit level at times, but is an explicit objective of psychoanalytic groups. Dialogue flourishes in democratic contexts where positive conditions, such as oversight or empathy are explicit.

### CONCLUSION

Dialogue is the common means by which we build, maintain, and grow in developing personal and social cultures. It is the way to convey meanings, nourish ourselves and each other, and find a grounding in existential being – together in our separateness – in "Koinonia."

... the larger group is a microculture of society, with the distinction that we can address it and be answered by it. It is the watershed between the world and the personal, individual, experiential mind. It has features of the unconscious mind, with the unique distinction of being like a dream in dialogue; it offers us the opportunity to humanize both individual and society concurrently. (de Mare, Piper, & Thompson, 1991, p. 21)

### POSTSCRIPT

At the 1995 Annual ADPCA Conference, I conducted a survey on leadership in large person-centered groups. I am in the process of analyzing the responses, and will share my findings and offer some suggestions about leadership in the large person-centered community meetings soon. Throughout this paper I have italicized words and phrases. It is my intention to use these as cues and clues as I continue my – and I hope shared – search for what will make for an optimal large person-centered community group.

I can already see that words and phrases which I have italicized in the body of this paper will be salient aspects of the final report. There is always a risk in discussing terms, and in bringing our assumptions to light. However, I believe it is vital that we do so if we want to clarify for ourselves and future participants in large person-centered groups the conditions and challenges that make the person-centered approach so dynamic and rich. This means wrestling with terms such as 'democratic,' 'member,' 'leader,' 'convener,' 'shared dialogue,' 'responsibility,' 'intentions,' 'expectations,' 'community,' and 'the three necessary (some say 'and sufficient') conditions.' Fully-functioning persons are nothing if not hopeful and open to possibilities. We will more truly understand and be understood as we make our implicit assumptions explicit. Dialogue will help us accomplish our person-centered, and I assert, democratic, goals.

### GLOSSARY

Ananke: from Greek, 'external reality,' 'necessity,' or 'fate.'

Anomie: from Greek, *anomia*, 'without law;' the alienation an individual feels when familiar social structures are not present.

Anxiety: from Latin, *angere* 'tormented, choked, strangled.'

- Authentic: from Greek *authentikos*, 'genuine,' 'authoritative,' from *authentes*, 'author.'
- Citizen: from Old French, *citesien*, from *cite* 'city;' the status of a citizen entails duties, rights, and privileges. 'common people.'
- Congruent: from Latin, *congruens*, 'to meet together,' 'agree.'
- Context: from Latin, *contexere*, 'to join together,' 'to weave or plait.'
- Culture: from Latin *cultura*, from 'cultivation,' 'tillage,' 'breaking up the soil,' 'letting in the air.'
- Democratic: from Greek, *dialogos* 'to converse, one with the other.'
- Empathy: from German, *empfindung*, 'a feeling in,' after Greek, *empathia*, 'passion.'
- Eutropelia: from Greek, 'good turning or versatility of the mind.' (According to de Mare, et al., 1991, p. 30) this includes the ability to see things in divergent ways. "... so that the familiar becomes strange and the strange familiar, 'tickling our sense of humour and provoking laughter' -related to the word 'Koinonia.' "
- Frustration: from Latin, *frustrare*, 'to disappoint,' 'to thwart.'
- Fully-functioning person: "... the person who is psychologically free. ... more able to live fully in and with each and all of his (sic) feelings and reactions. ... more able to permit his total organism to function freely in all its complexity in selecting, from the multitude of possibilities, that behavior which in this moment of time will be most generally and genuinely satisfying. ... able to put more trust in his organism in this functioning. ... because he can be fully open to the consequences of each of his actions and correct them. ... less afraid of any of his feelings. ... open to evidence from all sources. ... completely engaged in the process of being and becoming himself. ... discovers that he is soundly and realistically social. ... lives more completely in this moment, but learns that this is the soundest living for all time. ..." (Rogers, 1961, pp. 191-192)
- Hate: from ME, *hat(i)e(n)*, dislike or hostility towards. Also from German, 'compressed, hard, painful'; from Greek, 'squeezed, embraced'; Latin, 'anguish'; Old Norse, 'grief.' The authors of *Koinonia* conceptualize hate as arising from frustration, coming before guilt feelings, but after erotic feelings. It must be affirmed (not denied), cultivated, and transformed—through 'koinonia.'
- Infans: from Latin, 'unable to speak.'
- Koinonia: from Greek, 'communion,' 'a transformation of hate' and 'the opposite of panic,' 'making citizenship possible. Also, "... the Atmosphere of impersonal fellowship rather than personal friendship, of spiritual-cum-human participation's in which people can speak, hear, see, and think freely, a form of togetherness and amity that bring a pooling of resources" (de Mare, et al., 1991, p. 2).
- Meinen: from German, 'meaning.'
- Mindfulness: awareness of 'information as bound to context,' which engages us in a continuing momentum leading to feelings of being in charge, and with "... an increased freedom of action" (Langer, 1989, p. 152).
- Mynde: from Old Norse, 'vote.'
- Outsight: looking out at the surrounding culture and society from a perspective of openness to understanding.
- Polylogue: from Greek, 'dialogue developing in a large group through reflection from others.'
- Praxis: from Greek, *prattein*, *prassein*, 'actively doing.'
- Structure: from Latin, *structura*, *struere*, 'to construct,' 'to combine,' 'to cause to stand,' 'to establish self-regulation in a system.'
- System: from Greek, *sustems*, 'a composite whole,' from *sunistanai* 'to bring together,' 'combine,' *sun*, 'together,' + *histanai*, 'to cause to stand.'
- Verstehen: from German, 'understanding.'

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