GROUP PSYCHOLOGY IN THE TOTALITARIAN SYSTEM: A PSYCHOANALYTIC VIEW

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The author discusses the ideas of three important psychoanalytic thinkers about group processes in large social groups: Sigmund Freud, Wilfred Bion, and Erich Fromm. Their ideas are developed and applied to analysis of group processes in totalitarian systems, as they were known to the author in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. In conclusion, treatment considerations as they apply to patients who grew up in these regimes are developed and illustrated by clinical cases.

A man is what he remembers. And he is free, thanks to what he remembers. The same can be said about nations.

Leon Surmelian

Three important psychoanalytic thinkers—Sigmund Freud, Wilfred Bion, and Erich Fromm—contributed seminal and stimulating ideas to an understanding of group processes. Their analysis was also applied to large social groups, which can be extended to nations.

In this paper, I discuss their ideas and develop the specific application to group processes in totalitarian systems as I knew them in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. Personal as well as clinical analytic experience will be used to elucidate salient features of the group psychology in these systems and its effect on individuals. In conclusion, I discuss treatment considerations as they apply to patients who grew up in these regimes.

FREUD'S VIEW: THE GROUP AS MIRROR OF A FAMILY

Freud (whose books were banned in socialistic countries) predicted in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego” (1921) the development that actually took place in these countries:

This paper is dedicated to Dr. Alexander Wolf, who made his groups growth-promoting, free and holding environments.

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If today intolerance no longer shows itself so violent and cruel as in former centuries, we can scarcely conclude that there has been softening in human nature. The cause is rather to be found in the undeniable weakening of the religious feelings and the libidinal ties which depend upon them. If another group tie takes the place of the religious one—and the socialist tie seems to be succeeding in doing so—then there will be the same intolerance toward outsiders as in the age of the Wars of Religion; and if differences between the scientific opinions could ever attain a similar significance for groups, the same result would again be repeated with this new motivation. (p. 30)

Freud explains the psychology of groups on the basis of changes in the individual psyche. This original and penetrating analysis of group dynamics was developed further by other psychoanalysts, especially Wilfred Bion in the British Object Relations School and Erich Fromm in the American Cultural School; their findings will be discussed later. Freud's main thesis is that “love relationships, libidinal ties, constitute the essence of the group mind” (p. 23). He chose two groups, the Church and the Army, to illustrate how libidinal ties operate and how they are based on unconscious processes in the ego. He points out that both groups are held together by the illusion that the leader loves all individuals in the group equally, as a substitute father. Therefore, in each group every individual is bound by libidinal ties, on the one hand to the leader (Christ or the Commander-in-Chief), and on the other, to the members of the group. These ties explain the lack of freedom of the individual in a group, and alterations and limitations in his or her personality.

Freud considers that these ties in a group are based on identifications that are the earliest and original forms of emotional ties, derived from the child's relationship to his or her parents:

Identification is the original form of the emotional tie with an object; secondly, in a regressive way it becomes a substitute for a libidinal object tie, as it were, by means of introjecting the object into the ego; and thirdly, it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of sexual instinct. The more important this common quality is, the more successful may this partial identification become, and it thus represents a beginning of a new tie. (pp. 39–40)

Freud, seeing the ego as divided into ego and ego-ideal—which encompasses self-observation, moral conscience, and censorship—developed these ideas further in his theory of superego development. This agency (superego) becomes differentiated out of the ego under the influence of education and parents' prohibitions. For many people this differentiation within the ego is incomplete and poorly developed. Therefore, many people are prone to act and feel in regressive childlike ways; this strongly increases in groups by way of emotional identification with others and by the tie to the leader, who becomes a symbolic father. “A primary group is therefore a number of individuals who have put one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego” (p. 48).

In the primary group, the individual, according to Freud, gives up his ideal and substitutes for it the group ideal as embodied in the leader. In this process of identification with the leader and with each other, all members of the group