

In the Shadow of the Leader: Power, Reflection, and Dialogue in Gestalt Group Therapy

PETER COLE, LCSW, CGP

A B S T R A C T

The relationship between the leader and members in Gestalt group therapy is discussed in order to help understand and navigate difficulties and complexities that arise in this relationship. The author posits that vulnerabilities run high in Gestalt group therapy with potential for healing along with potential for wounding and shame. The group is seen as an intersubjective field rich in complexity, always in process, always unfolding and never fully understood by any group participant: member or leader. When negative or shaming experiences arise, insight and intelligence concerning the difficulty and its resolution are distributed among the group's membership and leadership, with each person holding a valuable perspective.

Key Words: Gestalt Group Therapy, shadow, rupture and repair, intersubjective group therapy.



Peter Cole, LCSW, CGP (Certified Group Psychotherapist), is Co-Director of the Sierra Institute for Contemporary Gestalt Therapy. He is an Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California-Davis School of Medicine. He is in private practice with offices in Oakland and Sacramento and lives in Berkeley, California.

Introduction

In this paper, I seek to shed light on the relationship between the leader and members in Gestalt group therapy. I hope to provide a perspective that will help Gestalt group leaders to better understand and navigate difficulties and complexities that arise in this relationship. Vulnerabilities run high in Gestalt group therapy where the felt potential for healing and growth exists along with a corresponding felt danger of the potential for wounding and shame.¹ The membership and leadership² of the group co-create an intersubjective field that is rich in complexity, always in process, always unfolding and never fully understood by any group participant: member or leader. When negative or shaming experiences arise, insight and intelligence concerning the difficulty and its resolution are distributed among the group's membership and leadership, with each person holding a valuable perspective.

I will refer to the relationship between the leader and the members as the leadership/membership field. The leadership/membership field has a special role in this process orientation to Gestalt group therapy. Reflection and dialogue around the experience of the leadership/membership field provides a rich ground of inquiry in which members have the opportunity to work with fundamental feelings toward self and other and fundamental modes of self-organization. Members are held by the leadership with support and connectedness to explore feelings toward the leadership; these feelings may be sharply drawn or amorphous, positive or negative. With the support of the leadership, group members explore their ongoing, unfolding affective responses to the leadership and discover much about themselves in the process.³

The leader, herself human and far from all-knowing, brings her own vulnerabilities, blind spots, misapprehensions, and desires into the leadership/membership field. I have come to designate the process whereby the membership's feelings meet the leader's vulnerabilities "the shadow of the leader." When the leader "gets" that her vulnerabilities are okay, and that part of her "good-enough" leadership is to accept her humanness and to encourage dialogue, then she can support the group in dialogues on

¹See Robert Stolorow's analogous concept of the repetitive and selfobject dimensions of psychoanalysis (Stolorow, Brandchaft, and Atwood, 1987).

²I have adopted the somewhat cumbersome terms membership and leadership as opposed to members and leaders in group work for a number of reasons. First, when we speak of the Leadership, we could be speaking about one or more people who are leading the group. Secondly, speaking of the membership and leadership allows us to point not just to an individual person but to think of that person fulfilling a role for the group that has both personal and archetypal characteristics.

³For a more in-depth look at affective process and affective development in Gestalt therapy, see Cole (1998).

the shadow of the leader. In my experience, these dialogues can potentiate growth and development for each individual member, for the group as a whole and for the leader.

Rupture and Repair in the Leadership/Membership Field

Vignette 1

In a Gestalt group for therapists that I co-facilitated several years ago with Daisy Reese, Rita was a new member who entered the group process with much energy. She shared frequently and passionately with issues regarding her challenges at work and her husband's health difficulties – issues that evoked sympathy in group members but lacked a depth of self reflection. After a number of group meetings, Daisy and I shared with our clinical consultant a growing perception that Rita was not leaving enough space for others to talk. Rita's thoughts followed one another without sufficient time for either the leaders or other members to share. We had tried to wait her out – to let her pick up on more subtle cues – all to no avail. It began to dawn on us that we had to intervene, and we determined to do so with a minimum of shame.

In the next session, Rita started in at the first opportunity, bringing in another health challenge that her husband was facing. Again, she left little space for others, and group members appeared to be sympathetic, yet growing tired of her dominance of group time. Intervening with this artfully was not easy. When Rita left a very short pause, I asked if others had ever felt similarly to Rita. Rita was not happy with this interruption and said to me with much agitation, "Peter, are you aware that I was not finished?" This was the opening of a very charged and rich dialogue. Daisy and I shared with Rita that indeed we did know that she was not finished, but that we wished to help her participate in the group while leaving space for others' participation. I did a piece of work with Rita around this in the group, which was intense for both of us but seemed to me to come to a fair place of resolution by the end of the session.

The following session, Rita shared that she had felt deeply shamed by Daisy and me, and that she was planning to leave the group. We shared with Rita our appreciation for her courage in coming back and talking about her negative reactions to us. She said that she had been dreading coming back to the group earlier in the week, had experienced difficulty sleeping and concentrating over the week, and with her husband had discussed leaving the group. Part of her felt that the entire group would scold and shame her, yet she held out some hope that the group might respond with support. I offered a "group-as-a-whole" perspective, as Rita was leading the way in the group for members to talk about their negative reactions to Daisy and me.

This perspective seemed to lend Rita confidence, and she shared a perception of me as remote and cold, and of Daisy as intrusive. Daisy and I supported Rita in giving voice to her perceptions of us, and asked if other group members felt similarly to her – inviting others to join her, so that she would not be isolated in her negative feelings toward us, and to protect her from being scapegoated in holding critical perceptions of the leaders.⁴

Other members joined in with critical perceptions of us, which we listened to with great interest, knowing that in this smart and perceptive group we had much to learn about ourselves. We listened and shared our “here and now” responses to the feedback. We tried neither to become defensive (which would deflect contact), nor to enter into our own emotional/psychological work in the group (and thereby abandon our leadership role, so vital for the safety of the group). We shared our appreciation for the group’s courage, along with excitement for a new level of honesty and risk-taking emerging as the group confronted us. We talk openly in the group about our own individual and group consultation (we feel that this is important modeling in a therapy group for therapists). In sharing our here and now emotional responses, we also talk explicitly about the boundaries we respect when we are in the “leaders’ chairs.” We let the group know that we are open to hearing all feedback, and that we will work with particularly difficult or triggering feedback in our own therapy and clinical consultation.

A sense of trust and holding started to form in the session, laying the ground for Rita to go to a far more vulnerable place in sharing about terrible physical and emotional abuse she had suffered as a child, and how our earlier intervention had triggered many deeply traumatic memories. Now Rita began to let the group nurture her, and to notice how leaving more space provided greater opportunity for her to receive the good feelings the group had to offer. She left space for others to share and became aware of deep connection with another group member, who had discovered enough safety in Rita’s new-found vulnerability to share her own experiences of early trauma. Rita had finally learned how to share time and space in the group. She decided to continue with the group, and we all grew a little bit in that session.

⁴Yvonne Agazarian (2004) has made an important contribution to group therapy technique in emphasizing the importance of sub-grouping. Instead of voicing support for a member coming forth, she invites other group members to come and join the risk taker in the theory that it is safer to come forth as part of a subgroup than to do so on one’s own. In a similar vein, Gordon Wheeler (Wheeler and Jones, 2003) has discussed the importance of sharing in the reduction of shame in men’s groups. When one member comes forward with shameful feelings, he guides the group in sharing their own shame rather than voicing support, as he posits that giving support without taking the risk of sharing similar feelings has the paradoxical effect of increasing shame. See also related discussions of shame and scapegoating in the work of Ariedne Beck (1981) and Anne Alonso (1993).

Normalizing Tensions in the Leadership/Membership Field

The leadership/membership field is composed of the relationship between the group members and the leader. When the leader has a framework for normalizing tensions and conflicts that arise in that field, she is better equipped to stay open and facilitate dialogue on group issues that involve her mis-attunements and shortcomings, or simply hurts that occur in the discharging of her responsibilities of leadership. These discussions are rarely easy for the leader, yet they can be richly rewarding when approached with openness.

Enactment

The plot thickens considerably when the leader's personal issues intersect with vulnerabilities of group members. It is my experience that just as in marriages, where vulnerabilities and wounds often cross-fertilize, so in groups the vulnerabilities of the leader have a way showing up, meeting with the vulnerabilities of the group members and getting enacted. These enactments can emerge in a great many ways.

Vignette 2: Enactment in the Leadership/Membership Field

Twenty years ago when I was in the middle of a painful divorce, I was "stuck" with my therapist group. Members were coming forward and working on their personal issues, work that was valid and important in its own way, yet contact between group members was superficial. Members were not being real with each other, nor did they bring up their negative feelings toward me. The group lacked vitality. In consultation, it became clear that I was much more mired in my personal issues than I was aware of; I was deeply burdened with guilt, anxiety, grief, and loss. This group of young therapists was composed of members who were struggling to find their voice, their power. Their difficulties with aggression and my vulnerable state of mind coalesced to create a group enactment in which group members treated each other and me with superficiality and a saccharine sweetness that left the group disempowered and passionless. Coming to grips with the ways in which my vulnerabilities were intersecting with the group's issues was a source of both suffering and growth.

I addressed the issue with the group, inviting their perceptions of me, and how I was running the group. A few brave group members talked about feeling that I was fragile and about not wanting to rock the boat in the group. I worked with these issues in my consultation and therapy. Once the group could talk about these feelings, the energy in the group picked up; group members felt more comfortable challenging each other and me. We worked

through this enactment, but it did not come easily for me nor for the group members. We could now meet each other more fully and work with feelings such as competition and attraction, feelings that added new vitality, sexuality, and excitement to the process and brought the group to life (Aledort, 2009).

Fulfilling the Leadership Role while Maintaining the Dialogic Stance

The leader has a job to do. She has many responsibilities to the membership, the most important of which is to create a safe enough space for the group to do its work (Feder, 2006). She cannot fulfill this responsibility if she is in the middle of doing her own deep, emotional work. In order to fulfill this responsibility, this unique role within the group, the leader maintains a dialogic stance while maintaining her vital role of leadership. This inevitably is a balancing act, particularly when conflict and negative feelings arise for members in the leadership/membership field.

The Leader's Dialogic Stance

In Gestalt group therapy the relationship between the leader and members is an I/Thou, dialogic relationship. The leader is right there in the group, with her authentic self fully engaged. She is, however, engaged from the vantage point of the leader. When she takes on the mantle of leadership, she has signed on to make the group members her priority and to do her own psychological growth work elsewhere. Finding equilibrium between being emotionally present as the leader and maintaining appropriate boundaries is always a balancing act. One way that I think about this balancing act is to be present to here and now responses, but if I feel that my own deeply seated personal work is getting triggered, then I seek the help of my therapist and consultants.

Vignette 3: The Leader Abandons His Role

Fifteen years ago, I was leading a men's group (I still lead this group with essentially the same membership). I was full of Gestalt therapy idealism at the time and believed strongly in its egalitarian ethos (but did not appreciate yet its nuances and complexities). One of the group members confronted me on the fact that everyone in the group talked about their personal issues but me, and he challenged me to come down off my "high horse" and bring my issues to the group. He felt that there was no reason that special rules should apply to me just because I was the group facilitator.

Naively, I took up his challenge. In the following group, I brought up a personal issue, thinking that I could do so and simply resume my leadership

role when I was done. Of course, this was not to be the case. Sharing my issue led to intense feelings, memories, and a somatic state that left me in poor condition to continue facilitating the group. Only with great force of will was I able to resume my role as group facilitator/leader. Discussing the issue later with my consultant helped me to consider my needs and self support as the group leader. What boundaries helped me to function well in the leadership role? How could I take good care of myself in the group?

I went back to the group the next week and told them about both my experience in the prior group and my consultation. I explained that, in order to bring the group the best of my leadership abilities, I could not do my own work there. It is now fifteen years later, the group members have been through much together, and the group has been a strong support in their lives. I believe that the group would not have survived and thrived all these years had I not set this important boundary.

The Shadow of the Leader

A holistic view of the leader must include the leader's vulnerabilities, characteristic blind spots, desires, ambitions, and fears. The *shadow of the leader* is composed of the aspects of those vulnerabilities that are out of awareness for the leader within the field of the group. No matter how much work we have done on ourselves, we Gestalt group leaders will never transcend our humanness, nor would we want to, for Gestalt therapy teaches us to embrace our humanity – to welcome it, not to master it – as mastery of what is within us would amount to a reification of the self. Moreover, each group comprises a new field that will create new blind spots for the leader. Our model teaches us to be curious, to do what we can to stay in contact with the many selves we contain (Polster, 1995). The shadow of the leader is a moving target, co-created by leader and group. Fear, ambition, seduction, humiliation, and all the other horsemen of the human condition will find their way into the Gestalt group and be enacted in some way that involves the leadership. The shadow by no means defines the entirety of the group experience; but when addressed, it will tend to get acted out in ways deleterious to the group and its members. There is no transcendence of the human condition, certainly not for those of us who are engaged in the gloriously mucky work of Gestalt group leadership. The attitude of the leadership toward the shadow will determine its effect on the group: if the attitude is one of curiosity and courage to consider these unsettling dimensions, then the leader models an attitude that will assist the group in its development and help group members stay alive to personal and professional paths of growth and discovery.

A Field Perspective on the Shadow

As I write, I am sitting on a train. Looking out of the window, I see the shadow of the train. It is dynamic. The position of the sun, the movement of the train, the terrain upon which the shadow falls – all of this creates the unfolding dynamic present moment of the train's shadow. So it is with the shadow of the leader. The composition of the group, its stage of development, the person who is sitting in the leader's chair, the attractions and reactions of the leader to group members – all are present in the co-creation of the shadow. No group leader can be aware of all of this experience. All group leaders must necessarily hold some aspects of the field out of awareness in order to focus on other dimensions of the field. The shadow of the leader is always shifting, is field dependent, and is co-created by all the people in the group who comprise the field. It would be impossible for group leaders to be aware of all the dimensions of their response to the almost infinite workings of the group. Instead, the group leader must relax into an attitude of acceptance, of not knowing, accompanied by a continual openness to new, surprising meanings that unfold as the group and leader do the work of the group.

The Shadow Reminds Us of Our Humanity and Vulnerability

Would it not be nice if we could arrive at invulnerability? Never to be humiliated, always to know where we stand, to know ourselves thoroughly, and to be the master of our own responses? Many Gestalt group leaders have this fantasy. In truth, though, yesterday's most exalted awareness may well be today's deflection. The most brilliant moment may have unforeseen and hurtful meanings. As Erving and Miriam Polster (1974) remind us, Gestalt therapy is a continual unfolding of polarities. A beautiful piece of work done in the Gestalt group may well evoke meaning for a group member that is seemingly quite the opposite of the positive meaning the leader has assigned to it. We do well to stay curious about, and make space for, group members to express the shadow side – even when we are basking in the glow of our most brilliant work. The question, then, is not if the leader has missed, hurt, seduced, been misguided, or dropped group members. Instead, the question is how these shadow phenomena have manifested. The Gestalt "superperson" who casts no shadow is a bad dream. What a relief to know that we will fail, and that in accepting our failure we succeed or, to put it differently, it can be a relief to know that all experience casts both light and shadow. There will always be a shadow side to all experience; in accepting this truth, we learn to work with the shadow rather than to deny its existence.

Power, Egalitarianism and the Shadow of the Leader

From the moment that the Gestalt group leader forms the group to the last minute of the last meeting, the leader assumes a unique position of power in the group. The leader has the power to guide, intercede, and decide who is admitted into the group. The group meeting typically (but not always) occurs at the leader's office, and the leader is (usually) paid by the group members. In Gestalt therapy, we bring a democratic, egalitarian sensibility to the psychotherapeutic enterprise, with an emphasis on contact as opposed to interpretation as the principal medium by which we do the work of psychotherapy. In the Gestalt group, however, we sometimes experience an Orwellian sleight of hand in which all the members are equal, but the leader is more equal than others. How we move Gestalt group theory forward to bring the Gestalt therapy ethos of a more egalitarian therapeutic relationship into being is central to a dialogue around the shadow of the leader. The problem here is the Gestalt group leader who wields great power but denies the group the space and permission to discuss that power because her egalitarian self-concept would have it that she holds no special power in the group. How can the group discuss, process, and make contact with the leader's uses and misuses of power if we suffer from an illusion that a differential in power does not exist?

The Gestalt group promotes a culture in which members may make new contact, think new thoughts, and articulate as yet unknown aspects of self in the field. Exploration of group members' responses to others and to the leader is an essential ingredient of Gestalt group process. The Gestalt group leader's acceptance of group members' responses to the leader helps make the group a safer, more egalitarian place. While not all members have the same power as the leader, they have the power of their own perceptions and responses. Each member has his or her own voice. Creating a group culture that gives permission, support, and validation to member's various responses to the leader helps to equalize power, and to enable group members to orient themselves better to the field.

The Leader's Authority and the Group Member's Authority

It is necessary for the leader to exercise her authority throughout the life of the Gestalt group. In order to attract members to the group initially, to lead the group through its various phases, to help members deal with their life problems, to inspire hope and to lead the group through difficulties, the leader uses her authority benevolently for the good of the group. The leader is the gatekeeper, the limit-setter with the final word, the one imbued with a special authority to confront members, to praise them, to shape the norms

and culture of the group. How, then, to work with this authority in such a way that helps group members find their own power, yet does not undermine the leader's ability to lead? The answer lies in a process orientation that makes space for each member's perceptions, feelings, and fantasies toward the leader about other members, and about the process itself. With a commitment to dialogue, the leader evokes from the group the shadow side of experience in the group, including the membership's experience of leadership in the group. This helps to keep life in the group real; it helps the group from overly idealizing the leader; and it helps the leader avoid addiction to being idealized or otherwise loved by the group.

Gestalt Groups Can Thrive When Leaders Continue to Do Their Own Growth Work

The Gestalt group therapy leader's commitment to personal and professional growth is essential to the vitality of the group. Leaders who invest in personal therapy, ongoing clinical consultation, and stay involved with the professional community are developing a support network that will benefit both themselves and the groups they lead. This support allows the leader to maintain a commitment to sometimes difficult and challenging dialogue around the shadow side of group life. In my experience, the membership can feel the leadership's willingness to access support and will respond positively to the leader who has cultivated strong support for clinical work and personal development. The membership's awareness of the leadership's support increases the confidence of group members in the capacity of both the leader and other group members to hold them with all their feelings. This increased confidence lends a sense of safety and vitality, allowing the group to thrive.

Belonging in a Flawed Yet Loving Group

When group members are given support and permission to articulate the deeper undercurrents of group life, the group becomes a place where change happens, not because the group leader is extraordinarily talented (although she may be), but because the group leader has fostered a culture where truth can be spoken, and where there is ongoing commitment to the dialogue (Yontef, 1988). The group becomes analogous to a family that, while far from perfect, has the ability to talk about what goes on in the family, and thereby builds deep bonds of attachment through intimate contact.

In the end, the articulation of the shadow alone does not change lives. Articulating the undercurrents in group life is just a necessary step along the way to intimacy, love, and attachment. The unsentimental, yet deeply

accepting, love that forms in the Gestalt group is what changes lives. When group members feel seen, shadow sides and all, when they can speak their truth about the group and its leaders and continue to be accepted, then they are on the road to achieving an authentic sense of belonging. There is nothing quite so healing as the feeling of being seen as a valuable and capable member of the group, one who is loved for who she is and valued for sharing her voice. Similarly, when group leaders are seen with their strengths and talents along with their flaws and shortcomings that can be talked about and worked through, they can be felt in their humanness and serve as role models for group members who wish to find their own humane power. The leader and fellow group members become a living part of each member's life, creating the ground for the emergence of stronger relationships, greater creativity, selfconfidence, and self acceptance.

Peter Cole, LCSW,
peterhayscole@gmail.com

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