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## **Group analytic methods beyond the clinical setting – working with researcher-managers.**

### **Abstract**

Group analytic scholars have a long history of thinking about organizations and taking up group analytic concepts in organizational contexts. Many still aspire to being more of a resource to organizations given widespread organizational change processes which provoke great upheaval and feelings of anxiety. This article takes as a case study the experience of running a professional management research doctorate originally set up with group analytic input to consider some of the adaptations to thinking and methods which are required outside the clinical context. The article explores what group analysis can bring to management, but also what critical management scholarship can bring to group analysis. It considers some of the organizational difficulties which the students on the doctoral programme have written about, and discusses the differences and limitations of taking up group analytic thinking and practice in an organizational research setting.

**Key words:** organizations, group analytic methods, critical management studies, complexity, uncertainty, consultancy.

## **Group analytic methods beyond the clinical setting – working with researcher-managers.**

### **Introduction**

There has been a lively discussion over the last 20 years or so in the group analytic community about the extent to which its practice and theory could and should be available beyond the clinical domain and particularly to organizations. The IGA still has a consultancy arm, and has previously cooperated with the Tavistock Institute in running 'Bridger Conferences' (Spero, 2003), which attracted group analysts, psychoanalysts, consultants and managers. The IGA is active in promoting reflective practice in organizational settings, and runs a diploma course on the topic. The broader discussion is informed by the perception of both an opportunity and a threat. The opportunity arises from a conviction that there is still a great deal that Foulkes' original insights have to offer to organizations where the tenor of discourse is very much focused on the performance and potential failures of individuals. The threat arises from these same processes of individualization, which marginalize the social as a site of inquiry, as well as placing an increased focus on what others have termed the 'regime of evidence' (Murray et al., 2007) and quantitative mechanisms of audit, scrutiny and control (Power, 1997, 2007). Where group analysis thrives on the improvisational, the exploratory and the unpredictable and a way of working which privileges interpretation and meaning, increasingly in organizational life what is most valued is the financial, the quantifiable, the predictable and the prereflected (Mowles, 2011, 2015).

This article reviews the experience of taking up group analytic methods in a university setting with practicing managers on a doctoral research programme. The Doctor of Management (DMan) programme has been running at the University of Hertfordshire (UH) for 16 years and has produced 53 doctorates. The article reflects on some of the adaptations we have made to group analytic practice and thinking in an organizational research context involving senior managers and consultants. The DMan is offered as a detailed case study, but makes no claim to speak on behalf of all such initiatives.

The article proceeds as follows. First I give a give a brief critical overview of some of the literature on organizations written by group analysts: I think it requires another article to do this rich literature justice. In a separate article, I will argue that current group analytic literature on organizations is insufficiently critical in managerial terms. In management research, critical management studies (CMS) is a minority tradition in management scholarship which takes an interest in 'social and structural issues of power, control, and inequality' (Grey, 2004, p. 182), and thus it critiques what we might think of as orthodox management theory for being overly instrumental and atheoretical. This is an important point in relation to group analytic concepts as they are taken up on the DMan because the programme sits in the critical management tradition. I then explain the origins of the DMan at UH and focus in detail on the way that the programme is run to combine action, reflection, writing and discussion with the intention of making managers more questioning of their practice, which combines group analytic methods and a broader canvas of concepts. I then explore what graduates say about the difference experiential methods used on the DMan have made to them and give an overview of the sorts of organizational questions that researcher-managers have become interested in. I then point to some of the limitations

inherent in deploying a group analytic perspective in supporting research and management in organizations.

### **Group analysts reflect on organizational consultancy**

This is a brief overview of the literature principally from the perspective of group analysts thinking about organizational life: it does not consider the large number of scholars who reflect on organizational life from a more orthodox psychoanalytic or Tavistock tradition. This deserves a longer and more critical treatment which will be the subject of a subsequent article.

A number of group analysts draw on psychoanalytic concepts and group analytic ideas to understand what is going on in organizations. For example, Proddgers (1999) considers delayering and restructuring in many organizations post WWII as invoking the loss of the idealized mother, the loss of the belonging group and a loss of containment, all of which provoke strong instabilities in a sense of identity. Meanwhile, Blackwell (1998) understands anxiety to be one of the key determinants to organizational coping and draws on the complexity sciences to argue that ideally they would be on the adaptive 'edge of chaos' if they are to cope with rapidly changing environments (although he doubts this can be achieved). He critiques the language of contemporary management for failing to acknowledge vulnerability and uncertainty and argues that good communication can facilitate necessary adaptation. Gleeson and Fairall (2007) draw on the seminal work of Menzies Lyth (1990) to understand the parallel process of managers and therapists acting out in a delinquent way in a therapeutic setting for young offenders.

Additionally, some group analysts contemplate what it means to take up group analytic concepts practically in an organizational context and describe what they think a group analyst-consultant should be doing. For example, Nitsun adduces a number of analytic concepts over two articles (1998a, 1998b), including Foulkes' four levels of group processes: the current, the transferential, the projective and the primordial to help think about what a group analyst might bring. He argues that the role of the consultant is 'holding the mirror to the organization as a whole' (1998a: 249) which enables the consultant to 'create distance and create space for reflection.' Nitsun also understands the organization as a whole to have a psyche. The idea, then, is to move the organization understood as a whole from dysfunctional to functional mirroring of internal processes and the external environment. In a subsequent article, I will take issue with Nitsun's idea that it is possible to hold up a mirror to the organization 'as a whole', and that the consultant is somehow outside the organization they offer consultancy to, any more than a group conductor is outside the group they are conducting.

Meanwhile Spero (2003) puts her finger on one of the principal differences between the therapeutic context and organizations:

...it is clear that he (Foulkes) was more interested in the techniques of conducting a therapeutic group – selecting patients, dynamic administration, 'observing and following the group' (Foulkes, 1964) and making interpretations than he was with questions of authority, power or status which are so pertinent to the organizational context. (2003: 324)

Power relations, hierarchy and status tend to be understated in the group analytic tradition, partly because of Foulkes' reaction to the totalitarianism he experienced: he intended to work with power differently. The Bridger Working Conferences were set up to work on Bion's idea of the double task, the work function of the group and the psychological processes which underpinned it, which would either help or inhibit. Spero refers to this as the 'tension system'. Participants in the Bridger conferences were invited to bring a work-based problem to the conference to reflect upon them, and which were then considered in a variety of different group contexts: in a search group, in a consultancy group (more in the Tavistock tradition), in small groups and in plenary. Thus over the time of the conference the participants both enact and work on a variety of work-based problems at the same time.

Gerhard Wilke (1998, 2014) has written extensively about the use of group analysis in organizational contexts. He is highly critical of the constant restructuring processes and changes in leadership which provoke profound anxiety in employees in organizations. Wilke does take a view on the high modernist tendencies of the quest for permanent improvement, which he regards as quasi-religious and as undermining the containment function of organizations like the NHS. In relation to these changes he considers his task as an organizational consultant as follows:

To put it simply as I can, it is no longer a matter of finding out what is wrong and restoring it to a mythical state or normality, but how to attain a temporary sense of order, and if you like, sanity, in a context of permanent change and adaptation. (2014: 25)

Wilke encourages employees to step back from 'manic actionism' so that they might contemplate and reflect on what is going on for them as a group. He argues that because the future cannot be foretold it implies greater humility on the part of leaders when they are vision-building. It is important that everyone can cope better with the idea of not knowing. A clinical consultant can help leaders better manage commitment, motivation and anxiety. To do so the consultant will be working with the organization's foundation matrix, helping the organization to adapt to change rather than resist it. Wilke claims to call on the skills of a group analyst, an anthropologist and a shaman in his work as a consultant. In being critical and reflective, however, Wilke does not call into question the idealization of leaders in the contemporary leadership discourse, a problematic concept in the group analytic tradition. Nor does he consider the role of political activism in resistance to repetitive organizational change: in helping employees cope, we might also be making them quiescent.

### **Summary of group analytic scholarship on organizations**

In this brief overview it is apparent how group analytic thinking can help better frame enduring problems in organizational life, can work against the tendency to rush to action without reflection, and can address the profound feelings which are often provoked by being in relation with others, often in conditions of uncertainty. A group analytic view can mitigate individualizing tendencies where it is assumed that organizational life turns on individual 'performance', and where there is a taken for granted assumption that professionalism means not addressing subjective experience. However, group analytic scholarship is less convincing in its critique of the conceptual management orthodoxy, a body of thought known as managerialism, which is behind many of the changes in organizations and the accepted



ways of thinking about them. As I outlined briefly above, the critical management tradition, of which the DMan is part, has concerns about the instrumentalising tendencies of much orthodox management and leadership theory. There is not the space in this article to explore this in depth, except to say that in contemporary managerial orthodoxy we are always rushing forward to an idealized future. The danger, then, when even scholars as aware as Wilke do not reflect enough on broader trends in management, is that resistance to change may become pathologised. Group analytic insights may then be deployed to encourage employees to be more adaptable, and become seduced into accepting the taken for granted dualisms that there are leaders and followers, managers and the managed, positive acceptance of 'change' or negative resistance to it. There is little discussion about whose interests these changes might serve. In my own view this is partly due to the weak theorizing of power relations in the group analytic literature, which as Spero (2003) noted is a requirement for understanding organizational life. To this end, one might look more to Foulkes' long term colleague and friend Norbert Elias for a greater understanding of how power relations play out in organizations, and what this means for the reproduction of power, knowledge, ideology and values. Stacey has set out some of these ideas in a group analytic context with two articles (2001, 2005) pointing out the similarities and differences that a highly social complexity perspective brings to understanding organizational life and I explain these ideas further in a future article.

In taking up group analytic ideas in the development of managers it is precisely to Elias, and others writing about power, that we have turned at UH, as well as pragmatic philosophy and social psychology. The intention is to help managers become more critical thinkers, critical in

the sense of critical management studies, as well as more aware of the psychodynamics of groups.

### **History of the DMan programme – developing critical managers**

Professional doctorates were introduced more than 20 years ago in the UK, in a variety of different disciplines (psychology, engineering, management, now medicine) and are intended mostly for more experienced practitioners who want to study something which is going on for them at work. The idea is that the researcher gains knowledge of both a theoretical and practical kind, that is to say knowledge from practice to inform practice (Banerjee and Morley, 2013). Researchers need to pay attention to the specific context in which they work in all its complexity and to notice how their own practice is formed by the particular conditions in which they are working. In the UK the majority experience of gaining a professional doctorate is that even if they attend classes on research methods, they are expected to plough their own furrow when carrying out research and writing up. It is understood as an individual activity and can be experienced by many students as isolating.

The DMan at UH combines insights from the complexity sciences aimed at better understanding the predictable unpredictability of organizational life with group analytic theory, pragmatism and process sociology (Stacey, 2012). Stacey finished his group analytic training towards the end of the 1990s and formed together with two other colleagues, Doug Griffin and Patricia Shaw. Both Griffin (2001) and Shaw (2002) brought philosophical perspectives which rounded out Stacey's thinking and group analytic training. He was also introduced to the work of Norbert Elias (1994, 1939/2000, 2001) by his supervisor at the IGA,

Farhad Dalal (1998, 2002). The combination of relationships, what Elias termed a figuration, between colleagues and friends and circumstances at the university before they became so corporate in their orientation, and thus risk averse<sup>1</sup>, led to the foundation of the DMan in 2000. Some of the first supervisors on the faculty of the DMan were trained group analysts, and this has remained the case for the last 16 years.

On the programme the research task has always been conceived of as a group activity. The research community as a whole operates as a slow-open group, where students come and go as they begin their studies or leave, either because they complete or because they are unable to do so and the community meets for four, four-day residentials, i.e. 16 days, every year.

As previously indicated, the perspective informing students' work on the programme brings together insights from the complexity sciences, the process sociology of Elias (1994, 1939/2000, 2001), pragmatic theories of communication (Mead, 1934), experience and values (Dewey, 1934, 1958), a complex understanding of time and action (Joas, 1996; Mead, 1932, 1934) and paradox (Mowles, 2015). Complex responsive processes, the term given to the perspective combining natural scientific and social scientific ideas, shares Foulkes' view of the sociality of self, which he held in common with Elias and the pragmatists, and it is for this reason that we draw extensively on Foulkes-inspired methods of working. Instead of prioritizing notions of parts and whole and the perspective of the outside observer, the staple of a good deal of contemporary organizational theory, the perspective of complex responsive processes conceives of organizations as complex games, i.e. domains with multiple players

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<sup>1</sup> Universities have been subject to the same processes of marketization, individualization and financialization which are the hallmarks of managerialism, of which this article offers a brief critique.

interacting in the living present, co-operating and competing to get things done. So in taking an interest in conversation, and every day interaction the parallels with the group analytic tradition are clear, although the emphasis on power is different.

In what follows I describe ways of working and as I do so I will comment on the methods deployed and the similarities to and differences from more orthodox group analytic theory.

### **Similarities and differences in ways of working – groups**

#### *The median group or 'community meeting'*

The anchor of the residential weekend is a median experiential group comprising faculty and students which is termed the 'community meeting', and which meets three times during the long weekend of a residential. As with any experiential group conducted in the group analytic tradition, everyone sits in a circle face to face, there is no agenda for the group except what people have on their minds, and the conversation is expected to be associative, improvisational and free-ranging. The group keeps strictly to time and finishes when the hour and a half slot is over. The sorts of themes that we might discuss are exactly what a group analyst might expect of such a group: comings and goings in the research group, which happen more frequently than in a clinical context, and the anxieties and sense of loss that these might provoke, recognition and misrecognition, the changing status of new arrivals and old hands, or perhaps struggles which are going on at work. Additionally, there are other themes which are specific to being a research community at a university, or are old themes with a particular postgraduate flavour. For example, there is a key juncture 20 months into the programme when students have to undergo a viva voce exam in order to progress to the next stage. This evokes feelings of anxiety about succeeding or failing, new arrivals wonder

whether they will ever be 'good enough' for this community when they listen to more experienced students speak about their work, or in reverse, new students arrive who have read a lot and provoke feelings of inadequacy in students who have been around for longer.

Unlike the group analytic tradition, however, no one in the research community is designated conductor in this meeting. This is not to argue that faculty members are perceived as equal members of the group because their interventions are usually perceived as having more authority than that of others, and this becomes another thing to talk about. But, as students become more mature in the programme, and perhaps more skillful in the group, what they say may also be taken to have weight, as in any experiential group. The other principal difference between the community meeting and an experiential group with a conductor, is that faculty members are just as likely to make personal disclosures as are research students. This is partly to acknowledge that this is a group committed to doctoral research rather than therapy. As with any experiential group there are often observable therapeutic effects for students of meeting in this way, even if the cluster of three experiential groups only recurs every three months (students may be on the programme for four years), but our emphasis is on drawing on the group as a research method (see further explanation below). Disclosure on the part of faculty members mitigates processes of transference, which are alleviated in other ways too. For example, the faculty and students socialize and eat together throughout the weekend. Although there remains a professional distance between the supervisor and the supervisee, there is a relationship of dependency between the latter and the former, which inevitably calls out degrees of transference, which I discuss in the next section below.

Another way of mitigating processes of transference is that group members, and in particular faculty members, are as likely to make links between what is going on in the group with organizational life as they are to point to unconscious processes. That is to say, the points of reference are as much sociological, philosophical, anthropological and organizational as they are psychodynamic. Where Foulkes was concerned to be light touch in his interventions and to encourage the group members to take as active a role as possible in facilitating conversation, so the emphasis of the DMan is to highlight the experiential group as a live forum for thinking about group processes in organizations and thus as a method of research. The intention is also to provoke critical discussion of received ideas on the leadership and management of organizations. I say more on research method below.

There are some topics of discussion which persist in the group over several residential weekends. For example, at one stage we had four Israeli students who wanted to leave the residential a day early to return home for a religious holiday. Attendance at all residentials for the whole four days is a requirement for completing the programme, which is similar to attendance requirements on group analytic training programmes. This provoked a lively discussion and very strong feelings in the group for nine months prior to the event about what it meant to be a member of the group, the extent to which Israeli students felt recognized or not as community members, whether the group was discriminatory towards them, and what we meant by treating people fairly. This allowed for more general contemplation of discriminatory dynamics in the workplace, what fairness means, and the judgement which is required to take up abstract principles in concrete situations.

*Learning sets*

The learning set is a fractal of the wider research community, and themes of discussion which emerge in the community meeting are likely to be discussed further here, and so return again to the community meeting. Each learning set member presents his or her work sequentially to the others, and they engage critically with the quality of conceptual thinking presented by their colleagues. This latter engagement is only possible on the basis of learning set members coming to know each other as participants in a group: in other words, learning set members become more perceptive about each other when they discuss their interactions at work because they experience them as community members on the residential weekend.

When new students join in the programme they are required to negotiate their way into a learning set which has a vacancy. In order to have some idea about which group they would like to join, they have to form a view as to where they might best be suited. Similarly, the members of the groups they might join are engaging in thinking about the joiners. There may be competition about who goes where, and this negotiation process involves the whole research community, which then reflects together on the process once it has been resolved.

I mentioned earlier that the supervisory relationship can also call out transference and countertransference. As an example, one of my students had a problematic relationship with his father particularly around school and educational achievement and his father would often silence him by accusing him of being stupid. In the family situation my student reacted by leaving the school his father had chosen for him, and educating himself at home. In our supervisory relationship we both struggled over how he would accept the discipline of doctoral study on the one hand, but express his autonomy as a researcher of his practice on the other. This led to his taking twice as long to complete his research proposal and initial

projects as it might otherwise have done. Equally for me, and countertransferentially, the student's behaviour reminded me of my son's teenage years and provoked feelings of irritation which influenced our supervisory relationship. In this instance I chose to name the transference process and remind the student that I was not his father, although I might be calling out those sorts of reactions in him. I would not always elect to do so.

In cases such as these there is always an ongoing discussion amongst faculty as to whether the programme continues to be suitable for the student or whether we should counsel them to leave. But in their interactions in the learning set, which are sometimes discussed in the community meeting the whole research community contributes to forming a view as to whether the struggling student should stay or leave. In this way it becomes obvious who is struggling to complete the doctoral work. The principal task is to complete a doctorate, and faculty members are constantly in discussion as to whether this is achievable in each case. This is another feature which distinguishes membership of a research community rather than an analytic group where the conductor would be committed to working with resistance as a characteristic of the therapeutic relationship.

### **Similarities and differences in ways of working – research method**

As I described above the DMan is informed by a theoretical perspective termed complex responsive processes, which takes an interest in theories of complexity and emergence and explains them in social terms. Emergence is taken to mean the interweaving of intentions of everyone in their local interaction (Stacey, 2012: 21). So we invite students to pay attention to the pattern of interaction during the residential weekends, and also to do so at work. It is the developing skill of noticing what is emerging in local interaction, and the evolving



capacity to put this into words, reflect upon it and theorise about it drawing on different, often critical traditions of thought which lies at the heart of the task of developing a thesis. One way of thinking about the thesis on the DMan programme is that it is a history of the student's emerging reflexivity and ability to notice themselves in relation to others. It describes their fruition as conscious and self-conscious participants in groups.

The thesis they develop comprises four projects and a synopsis which evolves over the course of the students' attendance on the programme. The first project invites the student to write an experiential autobiography: which groups have they been part of, which traditions of thought did these groups espouse, what were their formative experiences and how did all of this influence the student's patterns of behavior over time? This project calls out the whole range of experience for students: sometimes they write about a traumatic event, or a series of events which have preoccupied them for years, and which they are trying to make sense of in professional terms. Sometimes the process of writing throws up events which have long been repressed, and which, when recalled to memory, make more visible some troubling patterns of behaviour which have become stuck for the student. In concentrated and more coherent form, then, this is exactly what might emerge from a patient attending an analytic group over a number of months and years, but in writing as well as in conversation.

After the first project the student is expected to have identified a research question which has probably been an important question for them for most of their working lives. They then frame this in a research proposal<sup>2</sup>. Thereafter, projects 2-4 are expositions of how the

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<sup>2</sup> Putting together a research proposal after six months on the programme is very unusual for a student entering doctoral study. Usually, a research student would be expected to come with proposal already worked out as part of their admission criteria.

research question repeats in their working life. In paying attention to how this question manifests itself in every day working practice, the student is then required to theorise about it by drawing on organizational, philosophic or sociological scholars, who have written about the same phenomenon. Writing the thesis, then, is an iterative process of action, writing, reflection, discussion, theorizing, further writing, more action, more reflection etc. The effect of working in this way is to break down the taken-for-granted dualism of theory and practice and to reframe it as two phases of the same activity: all action implies a theory, and theory leads to patterns of activity.

The favoured research method on the DMan programme is narrative inquiry where students are invited to write about something which is going on for them at work and in which they figure. There is a substantial literature on narrative inquiry in organizational literature because of its appropriateness for conveying 'human time' rather than clock time (Ricoeur, 1990), because of its specificity (Bruner, 1991) and because of the richness it affords for interpretation of complex events (Taylor, 1979). Narrative has an experience-like structure (Stacey, 2012), and this has been recognized and taken up by group analysts too (Squire, 2005; Adshead, 2011) as a therapeutic method. And it might be argued that all therapeutic engagement involves encouraging the patient to renarrate their stories if they have become stuck or unhelpful. In the same way and on the DMan programme, students are invited to narrate their practice and to deepen it and make it more complex by renarrating what is going on at work and their part in the process as well as continuing to reflect on and theorise from it.

### **Summing up similarities and differences in method**

The DMan is an experiential programme, and encourages students to think out loud about what is going on for them and the wider research community. The intention is that students begin to make links between how they are on the programme and the way they practice as managers: their practice is at the heart of their inquiry. The intention is to challenge students from their settled way of understanding themselves and their work world and to become more aware of their interdependence with others, how they are forming others and being formed in their turn. The programme has family resemblances to a therapeutic community, although the object of coming together is for each of the students to produce a doctoral thesis. One might say that it is a programme which has therapeutic effects, rather than privileging therapy, because the faculty group is also prepared to ask students to leave if they are not keeping up with the academic work. It draws on group analytic methods with three median groups per residential as well as smaller learning sets, which are used to reflect on the experience of being together, as well as to focus more narrowly on thesis writing. Being in a group together provokes transference, but faculty members work against this process by running the median group without a conductor, being prepared to disclose in this group and during the weekend, and intervening in the group in ways which draw attention to sociological and organizational links, as much as the unconscious processes. Students write their theses iteratively paying attention to the nexus of practice, reflection, discussion and writing. They are not expected to come to the programme with a research proposal but develop one after six months reflecting together with their colleagues so their choice of topic more readily resonates with their colleagues' experience of them (I give some examples of research questions below). Students are invited to write narratives about what's going on at work, including an extended narrative about how they come to be on the programme and which experiences have influenced them along the way as their first project. Their colleagues

are then asked to respond to each iteration in writing and verbally during the residentials. They narrate, then renarrate how they are in relation to others, and how their practice changes as a consequence of paying attention to it for up to four years, and having people who come to know them well respond to their work. In sociological terms we understand the programme to be about encouraging reflexivity in a community of inquirers: in group analytic terms this might be construed as encouraging psychological or group-mindedness.

### **Research questions arising from this kind of inquiry**

The programme attracts students from all over the world. Students have had a wide variety of educational backgrounds, from university professors through to engineers with technical certificates. The principle qualification for coming is, more importantly, a curiosity to find out more about something problematic which is going on for them at work. It is this same curiosity, about oneself in relation to others, that might be considered a prerequisite for participating in an analytic group.

Students perform a wide variety of managerial positions within organizations, or run their own consultancies. In the current cohort we have students who are developing theses on: the extent to which being an internal consultant involves processes of collusion with traditional concepts of management, particularly when the student's participation in a research programme has begun to provoke profound critical questions for them; what it means to offer 'talent management' consultancy, which is a way of thinking about staff which identifies an elite 'talent' – if the future is uncertain, and we participate in groups, what does it mean to identify talented individuals who are predicted to 'succeed'? Another student is inquiring into the politics of developing IT strategy in a Scandinavian bank, while another is

researching the ethics of international development practice which often depends upon setting objectives at a distance for local inhabitants of poor countries who often have little say in what they are offered.

In all these cases students are expected to describe and explore how particular group dynamics constrain and enable their work, but they are also expected to go on to generalize from their experience. As with the presentation of research in a group analytic context, the idea is to produce a particular example of a general phenomenon in order to convey the power of the case, which is what I am doing with this case study. I now turn to consider some of the benefits and limitations of this way of working to managers.

### **Benefits and limitations of adapting group analytic methods to an organizational research context**

Last September, as part of a regular five-year review of the programme, questionnaires were sent out to all past graduates. Respondents were self-selecting (n = 22) and no inquiry was made of people who did not complete. Here are a number of examples of graduates reflecting on the difference the DMan made to them, particularly with reference to the experiential methods:

“The program design models the theory of Complex Responsive Processes, so it’s all about dynamic, high quality conversation.”

“Both the large group discussions held each morning of the program residential sessions and the small group discussions of our particular learning groups were very

helpful and illustrated *in vivo* the concepts and propositions of our subject of complex responsive processes”.

“I found the strong group analytic approach with its constant analysis of all utterances and behaviour unnerving initially, but eventually found my feet. I don’t think I was ever entirely comfortable with it. There was a significant number of analysts on my programme”.

“The program is grounded in the deep exploration of human relationships in organizations – including the DMan program itself. As a program that is not taught, the quality of discussion is crucial and the responsibility of all participants – faculty and students alike. If anyone found the quality of discussion or support lacking in any way, the concerned party need only be brave enough to start a discussion about the concern!”.

It is clear from these responses that some people never got used to the method, and found it unsettling, even if they could see the purpose of meeting in this way. But they clearly understand the link between the residential setting for the research community and the processes of becoming more reflexive in a group.

Graduates were also asked to comment on the difference that their participation on the programme had made to their ability to do their current jobs:

“The DMan was a life transforming event for me and strongly influenced my thinking and behaviour as an executive.”

“My learning from the DMan provided a sea change in my thinking about human interactions and has been essential to moving forward my work in clinical care research and improvement”.

“The DMan truly challenges almost everything you thought you knew. It is very far from mainstream thinking – in very good ways – and that makes it challenging to not fall back to mainstream as the intense discussions that characterized our time in the program get further away. There is no question that the program has influenced my thinking, being and doing in very profound ways that continue to evolve for me.”.

The overwhelming majority of respondents replied that the programme had enhanced their ability to function in groups and to carry out their roles as leaders, managers and consultants more skillfully. In reviewing the group analytic literature on working with organizations above I mentioned that there is more to be written about the extent to which the literature is critical of much contemporary management theory. In some of the above quotations it is possible to see that the programme had the effect of causing graduates to call some of the assumptions of the management discourse in their organizations into question. This does not always make it easy for them back in their home organizations. The experience of coming on the programme can be similar to the experience of patients in a therapeutic group: as they come to notice more about what they may have taken for granted, so the process may

provoke strong shifts in identity and relations with others which can have both positive and negative consequences.

### **Conclusions and limitations of group analytic-inspired research and method**

In this article I have described how the aspirations of the group analytic community to broaden their reach into organizations has been realized in one research programme which offers a professional doctorate to more experienced managers. The DMan programme is a type of therapeutic community where the therapeutic aspect of what we are doing together is deemphasized in favour of research, making links with organizational life, and completing a doctorate. We draw on sociology, philosophy and organizational theory, as much as paying attention to the psychodynamic. Additionally, faculty members mitigate transference processes in ways outlined above. Members of faculty come from a variety of disciplines, and although they are highly experienced in groups, they do not necessarily come with a group analytic perspective: rather their primary insights might be of a social anthropological nature, for example. Nonetheless experiential groups, reflection, reflexivity and communicative interaction are at the heart of what the programme offers as a way of coming to terms with the hurly burly of organizational life, which we draw on both Elias (2001) and GH Mead (1934) to think of as a dynamic game, constantly in motion. I have also pointed out how the method and the concepts underpinning our perspective go further than encouraging reflection but call into question some of the taken for granted assumptions about the discipline of management; they sit in a critical management tradition. Graduates of the programme have testified to the fact that the way of working has made them more skillful in groups as well as more critical about some of the taken-for granted ideas about management which are taught widely in business schools and are taken up unproblematically in



organizations populated with managers who have earned MBAs and other management qualifications. This can be both helpful and possibly career-inhibiting if the student finds it difficult to accommodate their new insights.

### *Auto-critique and limitations*

Just as I began pointing to the limitations of group analytic literature and its contribution to organizational consultancy, so it behoves me to critique the way we have adapted group analytic thinking in an organizational research setting.

As with group analysis, to run a programme this way requires faculty with the necessary qualifications and experience. They are not therapeutic groups, but nonetheless difficult and troubling material often surfaces during the residential weekends and it requires training to cope with it. Secondly, the kind of research we undertake focusing on taking experience seriously is not appropriate for everybody. For example, it does not lend itself to producing more tools and techniques of management, but rather privileges deepening understanding. Although in our view it is necessarily counter-cultural in contemporary organizational life, it can lead to frustration on the part of potential students if they are expecting one thing and find themselves learning something else. It can also lead to a mismatch of expectations for other colleagues back in the workplace about what this research process will actually produce. Thirdly, the programme attracts the usual number of students suffering from psychological distress, sometimes as a result of the experiences they have had in organizations, which can be places of great suffering. The DMan programme is not the right place for conducting therapy so if they do not complete the work to the requisite standard they are likely to be counselled to leave. In cases where students seek more help than the

programme can offer, this can be preoccupying for all concerned and distracting from the principal task of carrying out doctoral work. Lastly, calling into question received ideas about management and encouraging students to pay attention to what is going on for them and others at work can itself be highly unsettling for students and may alienate them from their work colleagues and perhaps even the careers that they have developed to date. As with group therapy, calling into question what one may have taken for granted often brings about profound shifts in identity and self-understanding.

However, after 16 years of the life of the programme students continue to produce interesting and valuable work and take back the skills they have learnt into their work environments. They are often better able to play the game of organizational life to their own benefit and those they work with. The DMan is a living example of the potential synergy of group analytic methods and research and managerial work, and is one manifestation of how group analysis is of relevance beyond the clinical setting.

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