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Work discussion: some historical and theoretical observations

Margaret Rustin

Despite its rather prosaic and literal nomenclature, work discussion as a component of professional education and practice has flourished in varied contexts since it began to figure as a systematic element in advanced training courses in the mid- and late 1960s. This chapter attempts to elucidate where the concept came from and discusses its significance. Although there has been an expanding literature on psychoanalytic infant observation (for example, Briggs, 2002; Miller, Rustin, Rustin, & Shuttleworth, 1989; Reid, 1997) and its later observational derivatives—young child observation, observation of the elderly (Davenhill, Balfour, & Rustin, 2007), and institutional observation (Hinshelwood & Skogstad, 2000) being particularly important developments—there has not, as yet, been a parallel growth in writing about work discussion. Perhaps its unglamorous name has had something to do with this, but probably more significant is the way in which it can disappear as a distinctive category and become subsumed under more familiar educational activities: it is easily placed as part of the now widespread notion of “reflective practice”, and much of it can be relabelled as “clinical supervision”. However, quite a lot is lost if the particular meaning that work discussion originally had is put aside, and within many courses offering opportunities for professional development and now validated as postgraduate degrees it holds a central position.

The systematic discussion of experience of work with small and stable groups of professional workers is the kind of work discussion that this book describes. It addresses the particular place work discussion has had in health, education, and social care contexts, and the form it has taken in the study of a wide range of work with children, families, and young people. The methodology of this kind of experiential learning is explored from a number of perspectives in the opening section. The theoretical background is a belief in the central importance of the emotional dynamics of experience at work. This entails a focus on those feelings, both conscious and unconscious, evoked in the worker by the task, context, institutional constraints, and daily relationships.

Interest in the relevance of unconscious factors in understanding the nature of work has gained considerable currency in the last six decades. Seminal books such as *The Unconscious At Work* (Obholzer & Roberts, 1994) have popularized the idea of omnipresent beneath-the-surface phenomena that have to be studied if the explicit aims of any work practice are to be achieved. The ways in which unconscious emotional forces can disrupt and distort professional practice and its outcome have become an object of study, and the power of this insight is such that it has travelled widely—into institutional consultancy, forms of professional supervision, applied group relations, and a range of training approaches. This attention to the unconscious makes evident the psychoanalytic roots of this tradition, to which other theoretically relevant ideas from group psychology, systems theory, and cognitive and developmental science have been added in varying combinations. Within this much larger body of work, this volume on work discussion represents one line of development in a field within which, while there is much shared in common, there is also much that is distinctive in the different tributaries.

Work discussion and child psychotherapy

So what constitutes work discussion? The first work discussion seminars actually labelled as such were offered by the child psychotherapist and psychoanalyst Martha Harris to a mixed group of people interested in a broad way in psychoanalytic ideas: Some of them were going on to train as child psychotherapists, others wanted to apply psychoanalytic insights in their established professional contexts. There was a strong representation from the world of education,

as the group included educational psychologists, teachers in special education (in schools known then as schools for “maladjusted” or “delicate” children), and teachers working in ILEA (Inner London Education Authority) primary schools that provided small groups for children who did not cope well in the classroom (the sort of groups that subsequently came to be called “nurture groups”). There was also an art therapist, a social worker, and a paediatrician. The individuals had not met each other prior to the first seminar, and no one knew what was going to happen—except that they hoped to get help in understanding the children with whom they worked. They learnt that what was expected was that each of them, in turn, was to bring a detailed written account of something interesting or worrying from their experience at work. A few years later, Martha Harris wrote down the essence of what she wanted to provide for the course outline of the two-year psychoanalytic observational studies course that had gradually developed, which also included infant observation and psychoanalytic theory seminars. This is how she put it:

Students bring detailed studies of their work for discussion in seminars. This enables a wider acquaintance to be obtained of the different settings in which children are cared for by professional workers. The studies presented include the interaction between the students themselves and their charges and in many cases pose questions about their role with colleagues in the organisation within which they are working. The presentation is then discussed by the rest of the group led by a seminar-leader experienced in work with children and adolescents, although not necessarily in the particular context within which the presenter is working.

No particular technique is taught in these seminars. The members are encouraged to consider and to discuss appropriate ways of dealing with the situations and material described after their possible meanings have been explored.

The aim of the seminar is to sharpen perceptions and to enhance the exercise of imagination so that a richer understanding of the personality interactions described may ensue, on the basis of evidence of motivation springing from internal unconscious sources. Education in sensitivity and increased awareness is a gradual process, inevitably attended by some degree of anxiety. “Not noticing” is one outcome of the defences against experiencing psychic pain in oneself and others. Becoming able to approach it more closely, and also coming to terms with the fact that there are no experts able to offer instant solutions is one of the problems with which each student in these seminars has to cope, to some extent. Likewise for

the seminar leader it can be a continual exercise to struggle with his feelings of inadequacy in carrying the parental role attributed to him and to do the best that he can from his own experience to throw some additional light on the situation presented.

The points made in this brief but evocative description point to the theoretical origins of this methodology and raise many issues for discussion. They include the emphasis on detailed reports from the workplace, on the range of professional settings represented in a seminar group, on the role and responsibilities of the worker, on the worker's relationships with both children and colleagues at work, and on the ubiquity of unconscious sources for many of the everyday interactions to be studied. In particular, the idea is mooted that unconscious motivation will be part of the worker's input to the interactions and not only something to be studied in the behaviour of the children.

The history and intellectual origins of work discussion

Before considering these themes further, our focus needs to widen its scope to investigate the influences shaping the work discussion concept deployed here. The 1960s climate of educational and social change—comprehensive schools, the widening of higher education and the Plowden report on primary education, for example—is an important backdrop. Interest in the idea of intergenerationally transmitted cycles of deprivation had had such an impact at policy levels that the Tavistock Clinic and the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations were provided with a new building within which clinical services for NHS patients and research and consultative work could develop. The optimism of the time ran quite deep—the democratization of the insights of psychoanalysis was an evident component of the concept of work discussion, since it operated on the basis that people of very varied levels of professional status and experience could learn from each other and also assumed that the unconscious could be explored not only on the psychoanalytic couch but also through free group discussion of emotionally significant events from the workplace.

The Tavistock Clinic and Institute housed some very original thinkers in the post-war period, and some of their ideas were vital to the generation of work discussion methodology. At the broadest level was the ambition to influence community mental health through interventions at many different levels, including the workplace. The early work of Elliot Jaques and the research studies of Isabel Menzies

Lyth and her colleagues demonstrated how creative were the ideas of psychoanalysis about unconscious anxieties and defences when applied to social systems and institutions. Hugely influential also were the ideas on role, task, and organization of A. K. Rice and others, including Eric Miller, Pierre Turquet, and Robert Gosling, as well as the study of large and small group interactions and the establishment of a programme of Group Relations conferences to further this study. Senior figures at the Tavistock thus shared a conviction, growing from the work of W. R. Bion on group phenomena and the wartime and post-war application of some of these ideas, that group life could be understood and could have therapeutic and developmental potential. The pre-eminence of the much more private work of the analyst–patient pair was thus challenged by a lively sense of all that could be achieved by groups able to function as “work-groups” in Bion’s definition. The work discussion group probably derived its name, in part, from Bion’s valuing of the working potential of a group that is able to avoid falling into the “basic assumptions” of dependence, pairing, and fight/flight and to enlist, instead, the ego capacities of its members to tackle the agreed task, to become a “work-group”.

A very important contribution to professional learning had also been made by Michael Balint (Balint, 1957), who invented a specific form of group learning for doctors (mostly general practitioners) usually subsequently referred to as “Balint groups”.¹ These groups had a regular meeting time and an ongoing life and were, indeed, focused on the professional life and anxieties of the group members, who were invited to describe a case that was on their minds. They were not expected to prepare this beforehand: instead, Balint relied on the group ethos and process to elicit material that could lead to an investigation of difficulties in the doctor–patient relationship that were disturbing the doctor’s professional capacities and decision making. This was a form of work discussion distinct from that described in this book because of its uni-professional group composition, its absence of written preparation, and its greater use of implicit or explicit interpretation of the worker’s emotional experience.

However, what was the case from the mid-1960s onwards for some time was that staff at the Tavistock all had some experience of group life being an object of study. They might, as doctors, be members of a Balint group, or attend a “study group” that met over a period to study its own behaviour with a consultant, or go as a member to a Leicester Group Relations conference. They would also, if they were

clinicians, be members of multidisciplinary teams where cases were discussed usually with a great deal of respect for the differing disciplinary viewpoints as well as hot debate over disagreements, and with an assumption that the most senior members of staff presented their clinical work for discussion as well as the junior staff undertaking training. Sometimes the group process was made use of in the understanding of the clinical phenomena of the case, so that “study-group” methodology and more traditional case conference discussion were integrated.

Some recent research into Tavistock history by Sebastian Kraemer (personal communication) has also drawn attention to another source for study group and work discussion methodology. He noted that Bion and Bowlby, the two intellectual giants of the Tavistock Clinic, had both been influenced by close relationships (both personal and professional) with Quakers, and he suggests that the circle of chairs that is the physical setting for this work in groups is an echo of the Quaker meeting. This is particularly pertinent in respect of study groups, where the consultant does not speak to start things off but waits for whatever may emerge, just as Quakers wait for the Spirit to be made manifest when someone is moved to speak. The work discussion group method is an important variant here, because there is a seminar leader with leadership responsibilities. In some adaptations of the model, there is a mixture of modalities: the leader may be called a facilitator or even consultant, and the work is approached in a less structured way than the one described here. These are important differences, since the closer one gets to a study group with its more therapeutic style, the further away one is from the idea that the group members are there to study their work role and to reflect on their experience at work in close detail, with the expectation that they can learn from this process and then apply their enlarged understanding in the work setting. However, it is useful to see the family resemblance between all of these forms of groups, particularly since individual group leaders vary in their approach, especially with respect to how much they may comment on the group’s own functioning as a way of enabling difficult issues to be addressed.

All of this added up to great value being placed at the Tavistock on working in groups, but at the same time there was a very different lens suggested by infant observation. Esther Bick’s invention of infant observation for the very first group of Tavistock child psychotherapy trainees in 1948 had been refined over time, and at its heart was the experience of a two-year weekly observation of a baby growing up

from birth at home, in interaction with mother and with others in the home. A finely detailed account of all that could be recalled was written up as soon as possible after the hour-long observation had been concluded. This material was brought to a small weekly group of up to five people, each observing a baby. Members of the seminar each took a complete seminar to present their observations, and others then contributed their thoughts and feelings, with the seminar leader taking the role of weaving together what emerged to construct as rich as possible an account of the family relationships observed, the baby's developing personality, and the possible meanings of all that had taken place. This model of conducting a seminar was central to the evolution of work discussion. Pride of place was to be given to the material presented, and all details were seen as potentially significant. The group shared a gradually growing knowledge of each other's work settings and responsibilities, just as infant observers shared the process of getting to know each of the babies and families presented. Each member of the group was to be accorded an equal space, and their experience was given equal attention. The quality of the group's experience in the seminar depended on the careful preparation done by the presenter of the day, so there was a sense of camaraderie, especially important in the early months of the work when infant observers often found it very difficult to remember what they had seen and work discussion seminar members found it similarly difficult to make the focus of their writing-up one that would facilitate exploration. The task of noticing and noting in mind one's own behaviour while having to get on with the job, whatever it is, proves very challenging for most people, and to combine the reporting of verbal interaction and obvious activity with the more subtle description of private thoughts, atmosphere, pauses, facial expression, and bodily pose takes a good deal of practice.

The essence of the matter is the focus on observation and the expanding range of what is observed and recorded. This involves, for the worker, finding a part of the self able to step back a little from the immediate and keep an eye on both internal and external events, the inner workings of one's own conscious thoughts and fleeting sensations, and the events all around one in the interactions at work, which may involve quite a number of people. Of course the training in observation provided by the task of infant observation is enormously relevant for work discussion, and it is a simultaneous experience in many courses where students do both. The creative conjunction is also embedded in other courses (Briggs & Canham, 1999)

that provide observational training of other sorts, such as institutional observation, alongside work discussion. Because the infant observer does not have to do anything other than observe, he or she can thus acquire an enhanced capability for observing detailed sequences. This background habit of close observation supports the worker trying to notice, think, and take action, often in quick sequence, and, indeed, in the seminars a very common occurrence is for the group to try to unpick—and slow down—the events by asking themselves about each step a little further.

Child observation and work discussion: an example

It may be useful at this point to provide an example of the sort of observations made and brought for discussion. The writer worked as a learning support assistant in a specialist day unit for primary-school-aged children. The link to infant observation is made explicit, and the physicality of the moment is very vividly described.

My first impression of Simon, then aged 7, was that he physically appeared to fill the space. He is an overweight child with a round face, thick, short brown hair, and large brown eyes. His clothes are often too small for him and appear tight and uncomfortable. During my first day in the classroom, he seemed quite withdrawn and anxious, moving himself around awkwardly, flapping his hands, and rolling his eyes into the back of his head—quite a contrast from several of the other children who appeared uncontained in quite a different way: more aggressive, larger-than-life figures, full of anger.

Here is an extract from a recent observation in the classroom:

Simon moved around the classroom seeming to spill out all over the place. He stood over the beanbag that he was aiming to land on and clumsily sat down, squashing Adam's feet as he landed. "Ow, Simon, get off my legs!" Adam shouted, nudging him hard with his elbow. Simon flinched and shouted "fuck off, stupid", appearing afraid and embarrassed at the tight squash and freed Adam's feet. Simon leaned over the container of books that was by his side and removed one and began flicking through its pages. He became fidgety and anxious and began scraping his back against the wall. He wriggled down, lay on his back, and held his legs up

high into the air. This seemed to help ground him. Once again, he leaned awkwardly into Adam, who, to my surprise, ignored the discomfort. Simon opened up a page of the book and appeared to look at it for several minutes. The illustration was of a pig who had clearly got himself into a mess. "Look at the pig, look at the pig", Simon called out and flapped the pages into Adam's face. Adam pulled back, took a look, and found the illustration amusing. Simon watched to see Adam's reaction and then withdrew the book and continued to look through it before being asked to put it away.

The writer commented:

This gave me some idea of how Simon was feeling, and I thought back to my infant observations and what Esther Bick describes when discussing the newborn in her paper entitled "The Experience of Skin in Early Object Relations" (1968). Simon seemed to be in such an unintegrated state, trying to hold himself together by creating a situation in which there was an equivalent of a continuous skin, with no gap, by fitting himself into a confined space and sliding to the floor. Simon then tried to communicate something about how bad he was feeling by showing Adam the picture of the pig—a large, rounded animal shaped like himself that was in a pickle.

*The challenges of work discussion:
disturbance of complacency and established practice*

Now let us return to themes suggested by Martha Harris' description quoted earlier and explore their theoretical significance. The first thing that strikes anyone joining a work discussion seminar is the difficulty of the task of writing a detailed account of events at work. It sounds simple, but it is not. Centrally problematic is the implicit request not to define beforehand what was going on in the events reported. The details are to be observed, not selected so as to give weight to a particular line of thinking. The aim is to strive for a relatively theory-free and non-judgemental attitude to everyone involved, including oneself. The apparently meaningless is just as valuable in the record as the probably or obviously significant. The debt to the free-association method within psychoanalysis is an obvious one. There has to be enough background for people to be able to make

sense of the context, but not so much as to deaden the impact of the immediate events in question, and not so many pages of description as to exhaust one's listeners.

The theoretical idea at the root of this demand that the writer should not already know the answer is the value psychoanalysts, and Bion in particular, place on being able to stay with the question, not rush to the answer. *Not* knowing is held to be a primary requirement of being able to "get to know" something. The distinction is between a form of "knowledge" that impedes exploration and learning because it is saturated knowledge, without space for discovery and an active relationship to the as yet unknown, and a process of cognitive and imaginative relating to experience that is a transitive and provisional one and leaves room for changing emotions and for uncertainty. The theory of work discussion as pedagogy is that the seminar leader's task is the creation and sustaining of an atmosphere of enquiry in the group characterized by curiosity, scepticism, fellow-feeling, debate, differences, so that the unknown can become less unwelcome and new thoughts, questions, and perceptions find fertile ground. There is not one "right" way to do or have done whatever is being studied: instead, there are some facts that can be viewed in many different ways, yielding new lines of enquiry.

This can be very far-reaching, since it can, for example, raise quite unexpected ideas and conflicts about what the role of a teacher or psychologist or social worker in fact is. The obvious—the starting point for each worker who already has a working model of what their job is about and an internal authority in the background felt to support this way of going about things—is the thing to be brought into question. This is, in fact, why work discussion in some form can—and perhaps should—be a career-long form of professional development. The whole point is the new perspective that can be embraced to enrich the familiar.

The decision to create groups mixed in terms of intellectual and professional background, differentiating the methodology from Balint's type of group, is intriguing. It was, no doubt, in part a consequence of the particular range of people who had expressed interest at that time in studying their experience at work from a psychoanalytic perspective, but it also seems to represent the commitment to learning from a plurality of sources. Just as infant observation seminars were to be stimulated by the differing familial worlds of the babies observed, so the work discussion group was to attempt to learn about the lives of children and young people in many contexts—school, playground,

residential settings, community clinics, and so on—and the seminar members were also invited to absorb a sense of the many different professions involved in children's welfare and education. This professional pluralism went well beyond the traditional multidisciplinary mix of child guidance clinics, and perhaps prefigures the ideas that have become embedded in recent public policy about the necessity for joined-up thinking about children's development and for collaborative practice in the spheres of health, social care, and education. It was quite remarkably different from the dominant uni-disciplinary model of university education at that time and suggested, instead, that the mixing of modes of thought and vertices of observation was what could be most invigorating. It is interesting to note, in fact, that debates about teaching methods in education following on Basil Bernstein's differentiation between "collection" and "integrated" codes led to the theorization of a pedagogy (the "integrated" code) in which the concepts and theories used were more implicitly defined and learning was problem- or experience-based. This approach relied on the idea that learners could bring different perspectives to bear on the object of study. There was not one right definition, to be imparted by the teacher in a hierarchical relationship to the learners, but, instead, a more "horizontal" exchange of ideas. The professional pluralism of work discussion methods is an example of this kind of approach (Bernstein, 1975, especially Part II).

What distinguished the task of work discussion from infant observation was, most fundamentally, the twin focus of the recording of detailed interactions, with an emphasis on understanding the role of the worker and exploring its potential. The concept of role, and its link to a grasp of the nature and task of the organization in which the worker was embedded, introduced seminar members to thinking about organizational life and gave the seminar a social and at times political dimension. The tension between the psychoanalytic interest in the internal world and subjective meanings and the external work context, with its many demands and inherent limitations, was continually in play. Sometimes this would appear through different positions being espoused by different members of the seminar group, one wanting to prioritize the dynamic power of individual unconscious phantasy and another emphasizing external factors shaping behaviour. Debates about causation were rarely explicit, but the movement back and forth between perspectives could allow for the recognition of the ongoing influence in both directions. For example, the more primitive and often authoritarian forms of morality characteristic of sharply

split states of mind could be considered in the light of the increasingly permissive society developing in the 1960s and early 1970s. What sense could people make of the poor fit between the ideas of retributive justice so often dominating the morality of small children, which could be felt through projective processes as painful pressures by the adults in charge, and the conscious beliefs of these same adults in a softer morality that valued understanding and was reluctant to impose too many limits and penalties? This sort of struggle has to be reworked in every work discussion seminar, and it involves clarifying and critiquing the values of contemporary institutions alongside the study of how individuals create their own meanings.

One of the tricky aspects of work discussion groups is always the realization that the relationship between staff in the work setting will provide some of the points of painful conflict that the seminar member needs to discuss. This is made easier if the seminar is composed of people from entirely different settings and, of course, also underlines the necessity for preliminary discussion of the confidentiality of material presented in the group and exploration of how suitable anonymity of professional colleagues will be maintained. Sometimes people resort to initials to avoid names, but these can feel quite dehumanizing; changes of name are an alternative, though often difficult to adhere to systematically under the pressure of emotional material. There is discussion elsewhere in this book of adaptations of method required when the seminar members are all working in the same place, as in the chapter by Emil Jackson. But discomfort usually accompanies the description of staff conflict, partly because the differential status inherent in adult-child interactions is no longer protective of the individual, and the revelation of personal weaknesses is feared. For example, one teacher doing small-group work in a primary school described her profoundly upset and almost paranoid reaction to a decision by a class teacher to remove one of the members of the small group because of other priorities in the class. She was quite unable to imagine that the child's improved state of mind might make her now an asset in the classroom, believing instead that one of her babies was being stolen from her, and feeling in a panic about her vulnerable position in the school. It was very interesting to link this potential breakdown of adult cooperation to the social context of these children's families, most of whom were very recent immigrants to the United Kingdom, thus having lost the support of the wider extended family and quite often having left children behind in the home country, to be cared for by grandmothers. The worker's identification with

a child who could not be properly shared and with a mother figure deprived of a child and in an anxious and distressed state of mind seemed likely to be fuelled by these unconscious associations. The method of work in the seminar allowed these connections to emerge in a manageable way because the idea offered for exploration was that the worker's being upset was likely to be something to do with the meaning for the child of the movement between small group and class that could be thought about.

The contribution of the theory of containment

As Gianna Williams and Beta Copley proposed in an earlier unpublished review of work discussion, the overarching theory of greatest relevance is Bion's theory of containment. This "stepping stone in development" (Bion) proved the flexible idea that could be powerfully employed to support workers and hence the children in their care. The containment offered by the seminar and the tasks of written preparation and conversational exploration set for its members proved to have a usually reliable impact. A new space, which amplified the resources of individuals at work, was created. People's minds grew, and new ideas could be considered because the seminar was felt to be a safe place for confusion, depression, uncertainty, and a sense of being overwhelmed or incompetent to be described, as well as a place to enjoy happier aspects of people's work. The role of the seminar leader is explored in greater detail in chapter 2, but what it required fundamentally was someone who could create a non-judgemental atmosphere, promote curiosity and hopefulness, bear disappointment, relate to the seminar members as creative people, and sustain a culture of equality. Insights offered and carefully grounded in the details of what had been discovered were not so liable to be elevated to *ex cathedra* status and idealized but, instead, to be available as work in progress. Future seminar discussions could review what had proved useful and what would need to be revised.

The seminar leader's function is evidently parental in some respects, and indeed the nature of the task bears comparison with that described as characteristic of "couple family" functioning by Harris and Meltzer in their delineation of forms of family life (Meltzer & Harris, 1986). There have been interesting variations made in work discussion methods in specific contexts, including one well-established within the context of a course for teachers on the emotional aspects of teaching and learning, in which a pair of seminar leaders work with a

rather larger group of students: ten, as compared with the normal five or six (Hartland-Rowe, 2005; Youell, 2006). This makes for a sense of a parental couple working together and able to share the more maternal and paternal aspects of the task between them. We might see these broadly and schematically as supportive, nurturing, encouraging, and providing time and space on the one hand, and challenging, limit-setting, stimulating, and exciting on the other. Where there are two leaders, they can engage in dialogue both within, and also subsequent to, seminars, and this models at best the creative conjunction of different perspectives. For a single seminar leader, the process has to be more internal, with the aim being to achieve a balance of receptive support and the challenge of the new—not so very different from the task of psychoanalytic psychotherapists in their clinical work.

Recurrent themes in work discussion

In thinking about the evolution of work discussion, it has been interesting to gather up some of the themes and characteristic directions that emerge from a very wide reading of work discussion papers and seminar material. The later chapters in the book provide many detailed examples but they each have a highly specific context and it may therefore be useful to note here some regularly recurring preoccupations.

Prominent preoccupations in work discussion seminars are the importance of beginnings and endings and the impact of loss and separation. These reflect the experience both of workers and of the children they work with and are relevant to the life histories of many of the troubled children they encounter—loss of parents by death, abandonment, and marital breakdown, loss of country and community through war and exile, and the many less dramatic but searing deprivations arising from disability, maternal depression, poverty, and social exclusion, and, indeed, the ordinary management of transitions, such as that from home to nursery. The opportunity in the work setting for children and adolescents' anxieties linked to separation and loss to be reworked in the relationships formed with significant adults is a discovery made by many. Institutional turbulence is often a spur. Nurseries, schools, inpatient adolescent units, children's homes all experience staff changes, managerial reorganization, and sometimes merger or closure. Even staff illness and absences and the comings and goings of staff rotas can be seen to have a great impact on the security and the state of mind of the children. Acting out becomes

more marked, sometimes to a frightening degree when potentially self-harming young people are disturbed by such changes.

In understanding these reactions, there is a richness of theory to draw upon—both the psychoanalytic literature on mourning and depression by Freud, Klein, Winnicott, and others, and the literature from attachment theory developed by Bowlby and current attachment researchers. The clinical work of child psychotherapists over the last three decades with severely deprived children, particularly those in the care system, has helped to make these theoretical ideas accessible to those who work with disturbed children, particularly throwing light on the phenomenon of “double deprivation” (Henry, 1974), when a deprived child becomes identified with a cruelly depriving internal figure and is, in consequence, very difficult to reach or to help through offering a better experience in the here and now.

Play is a vital part of work with children, and learning to be able to think about a child’s state of mind through observing play is a central plank of work discussion, often building explicitly on the observation of toddlers and young children, which is a frequent accompanying seminar experience. Finding a position in relation to a child’s play or incapacity to play is a complex matter and is, of course, connected to the definition of the worker’s role. In nursery work, there is a plethora of possible positions for the adult to take—to supervise group play, to accompany an individual child or small group through the attentiveness of close observation, to lead or organize activity, or to be a “play-partner” (Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976), following the child’s lead.

More difficult and distressing is the encounter with children who cannot play. The pain to which the worker who pauses to watch closely can be exposed is often startling. For example, here is a description of the response to nursery of a boy of 2¼ who spoke almost no English:

Amir is sitting on the chair by the doors, focusing on the space in front of him with a blank and dull expression in his moist dark brown eyes. His hands are tightly clutching his blue bag. He remained seated on the chair from the time his mother left him at 1 p.m. until the time she came back to pick him up at 3.30 p.m. As I felt very concerned, I asked the nursery nurse about him, and she reassured me in a detached tone of voice that he was “doing OK, actually” and was “becoming much better”. Later she sighed and added, “At least, he has stopped screaming—he used to cry all the time. Now he just sits there and does not want to join in.”

Amir continued his practice of waiting for his mother to return while sitting on the same blue chair each day for nearly a whole term.

The observer was herself struggling with the recognition of the unfamiliarity of the complex multicultural mix of the nursery, very much able to identify with this boy's sense of disorientation and panic in her awareness of not understanding the children's mother tongue or knowing much about their cultural background.

The diverse theories of the development of the capacity to play and of impediments to play offered by psychoanalytic theory, developmental researchers, educationalists, and clinicians provide a rich literature to explore.

The opportunity for discovering the complexity and variety of children's lives in the United Kingdom was, for me, a wholly unexpected aspect of the work discussion seminar experience. Class, cultures, religion, regional difference, ethnicity, sexual mores all make themselves felt once details are attended to. One unusual example of this were the reports of a support teacher for Traveller children (Dollery, 2002). She found herself understanding gradually why the early good achievements of Traveller children at school tended to tail off dramatically. Their parents did not really see the sense of education beyond the age of 11—by that age, the community believed, the children could and should be working, and school simply infantilized them. She also observed that whereas schools—and she herself—believed in individual development as the aim of education, Travellers saw the group identity as the important one, and too much focus on an individual as a threat to group cohesion. She puzzled over the concrete thinking the children seemed to continue to display despite their maturing in other ways. Reflecting on this, in an unpublished paper arising from her participation in a work discussion seminar, she wrote:

It is a community that responds and acts in a very concrete way. There is little space for reflection. The culture not only encompasses physical movement from one place to another but also a continual mental shift away from difficult thoughts and feelings. On many occasions when speaking to the parents, my head becomes cloudy and I find it hard to take things in, as though my thinking capacity is also being interfered with. Negative feelings cannot be held onto and are quickly discharged, often through acts of violence both within the family and wider community.

This cultural inability to take in, reflect upon and digest nega-

tive experiences results in a lack of containment for the children, leading to difficulties in thinking and symbolising. Melanie Klein's concept of "Epistemophilia" (Klein, M., 1931), the child's wish to learn being linked to curiosity about the mother's body and later her mind, is also severely inhibited. Sexuality is a taboo subject for these children. Bodies are kept covered, babies are universally bottle-fed. Underclothes are washed and hidden under towels. Children are usually refused permission to attend sex education classes.

She also tried to understand the women's inability to do anything about frequent domestic violence: they would depart to a refuge with the children, but then simply return a few days later, with flimsy promises from their husbands. This is how she came to describe the form of cohesion with the Traveller community:

Those Travellers who do work have jobs that depend on employment from the settled community, making it rather a symbiotic relationship. A definition of gang mentality I came across seems relevant to this. "The gang-family, by virtue of its ambiguous relation to the community, at once defiant and yet seeking acceptance, greedy and at the same time scornfully proud, imposes a confusing task on its members."

My experience is that defences of hostility amongst Travellers are rather brittle and skin deep. Throughout history, there have been periods of extermination of Travelling people. The legacy of this destruction is a lack of an imbued sense of good self-esteem within the culture. Indeed it seems to me that the culture itself serves as a "second skin equivalent", giving Travellers a sense that the rudimentary parts of their personality can somehow be held together, as long as they remain members of the group. In this way, the Travellers on site tend to develop the social appearances of a personality but seem to lack a sense of inner mental space and internal resources.

Existence within the community seems to be one of "adhesive identification" to the basic assumption of the group, namely that threats lie outside.

We can see that work discussion has provided her with theories about group process (basic assumptions, gang mentality) as well as ideas about individual psychic development (the epistemophilic instinct, projection, symbolization, intolerance of mental pain) and that the two forms of theoretical understanding are joined in her interesting suggestion that Traveller culture itself serves as a kind of "second skin" for a fragile and frightened community.²

Conclusion

These examples of theoretical resource and theorized discovery, as in the work with the Traveller children, bring us to the question of the place of theory in work discussion seminars. Doubtless there are substantial variations in practice, but an agreed emphasis would be to focus on the material brought to the seminar and the elaboration of its possible meanings in the responses within the group. The mode of learning is not, of course, theory-free—the structure of the seminar and the leader's responses are profoundly rooted in theoretical assumptions, as discussed earlier—but theory is kept in the background. Suggestions about what people might like to read to follow up ideas and insights are likely to include a considerable range: psychoanalytic and child psychotherapy literature, child development texts, the analysis of group and institutional life, social theory, and also works of literature, including children's literature. But the seminars themselves will often include little explicit theoretical discussion, although this generalization has to be set alongside the fact that each particular mix of members and seminar leader produces a unique constellation. This model of education is, I believe, fundamentally transferable and adaptable. The question of how much theory to make available and also the nature and range of the theories that are drawn on is an open one. The psychoanalytic framework described here has proved workable and fertile, but it seems entirely possible that other theoretical perspectives could be combined with the core approach.

It seems appropriate here to summarize briefly my view of the aims and methods of the work discussion groups as they have evolved. Let us imagine a particular seminar early in the life of a group's existence. It starts with clarification of the worker's role and tries to describe as fully as possible what is happening in the interactions reported, to discuss what the child is conveying, and to take account of what is evoked for the worker while safeguarding the worker's own privacy. There is no expectation of finding an answer, but a commitment to facilitating thinking. To do this, the individuals and the group between them need to hold things in mind, to learn to listen, to appreciate the containing potential of setting and institution, to think about what might be helpful (and be realistic about what help is available and appropriate in the setting), to learn to hear and also to use different forms of communication, and to consider others' perceptions of the situation. Attention to boundaries of time and place and to issues of confidentiality are background commitments, as is the struggle to

be in touch with the feelings, conscious and unconscious, of everyone involved. What this means in practice for the development of sensitivity and the expansion of skills and understanding is what the rest of this book is about.

Notes

1. This methodology was also adapted for use with physiotherapists by Stanford Bourne and reported in Bourne (1981), *Under the Doctor: Studies in the Psychological Problems of Physiotherapists, Patients and Doctors*.

2. This understanding, obtained from work discussion of the psychosocial dynamics of a Traveller community, provides a vivid illustration of Mary Douglas's "grid-group" analysis of social forms. This community seems like an enclave, in Douglas's four-fold typology, giving its dominant priority to the preservation of group identity over individual opportunities (see Douglas, 1970).