

Group Therapy in Israel

Orit Nuttman-Shwartz and Haim Weinberg^{1,2}

This paper is an analysis of the group therapy and the group work phenomena in Israel as a microcosm of the Israeli society and culture. We discuss the structure of Israeli society and its features, identify the key norms and myths that express the social unconscious, and pinpoint events that mark critical points of change. Drawing on these, the paper then describes some examples of the influence of Israeli identity on participants' and group therapists' behavior, and on current training programs.

KEY WORDS: group therapy; social-cultural myths; Israel; society.

Some theories of group functioning propose that a group is a microcosm of the environment in which it functions (Hopper, 1985; 1996). Therefore, in order to understand the phenomena of group therapy in Israel, it is necessary to understand the social, cultural, and political contexts in which these groups operate. It is also necessary to examine the development of group psychotherapy in Israel in tandem with the evolution of Israeli society.

We begin by describing the key features of the practice of group therapy in Israel, and then connect them with the major social, cultural, and political trends in the society-as-a-whole as well as in society as a conglomeration of subgroups. We then identify the fundamental norms and myths that express the social unconscious. Inevitably, we must be highly selective and even personal in our choice of material and perspective. Thirdly, we go on to describe some unique difficulties in leading groups in Israel and point out special influences of Israeli identity on the group therapists' and participants' behavior. The question of the mutual influences of group work on the Israeli society is raised in the discussion.

¹President of the Israeli Association of Group Psychotherapy, Bob Shappell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Israel.

²Correspondence should be directed to Orit Nuttman-Shwartz, Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel; e-mail: shwartz@post.tau.ac.il or Haim Weinberg, 6 Harduf Street, Zahala, Tel Aviv 69930, Israel; e-mail: haimw@netvision.net.il.

ISRAELI SOCIETY: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The state of Israel was born to create “a national home for the Jewish people,” but it was built through battles and struggles. In order to facilitate the immigration of Jews from all over the Diaspora, and establish the identity of the Jewish settlement, certain social-cultural myths and narratives were developed. These were based on solidarity from within and faith in Israeli justice in the shadow of war. This required the creation of a new entity based on a common past and a united illusionary identity (the Israeli “Sabra”: the newborn in Israel) with no differences of religion or tradition (including denying the Arab minority living in the country), and with a clearly identified external enemy (Moore and Bar On, 1996). In our view this creation prevented the working through of traumas from the Holocaust, immigration, and life-style alterations. The focus on activity, such as the combination of building a new country and going to war, impeded the working through of emotional issues such as mourning the loss of families in the Holocaust and elaborating guilt feelings. Life in the shadow of war also contributed to the difficulty in dealing with these traumas. This need for a new identity in the midst of existential threat encouraged seclusion and strengthened outer boundaries while blurring inner ones. The Kibbutz and its ideology of equality, where everybody works according to her or his ability and receives from the community according to her or his needs is an example of these processes (irrespective of its actual practices). There was also a felt need to create an illusion of a new society with modern humanistic social norms praising the image of the enlightened Israeli “Sabra” warrior (Gretz, 1995). This was in stark contrast to the image of Jew as Holocaust victim, or physically frail intellectual.

The Six-Day War of 1967 expanded the country’s geographic boundaries, strengthened the illusion of power, and prevented difficult issues from entering the social conscious. The solidarity and unity myth, with its denial of otherness and requirement of being in a state of war, barred the opportunity for developing diversity.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 transformed these myths; Israel was no longer a country exclusively of omnipotent strong people. The social myths were shattered due to the war’s events, the surprise, the number of fallen, and the lack of belief in the leaders. This undermining led to feelings of weakness, failure, and subgroup diversity that had previously been denied. It enabled a view of Israel as a “normal” country and part of the rest of the world. The social rupture following this war created a split in Israeli society, rebellion against traditional leadership and, perhaps most significantly, dissolution of the social dream. In reaction to this process, and in an effort to maintain the myth of unity and power, the regime became more ideologically right wing. Disagreement and social division increased with the Lebanon War of 1982. Eruption of social differences was not accompanied by acceptance but by a magnification of the differences and a fortification of the

boundaries between subgroups (in contrast to the prior rigid boundaries between Israel and the outside world.) The neighbor became the enemy. The peace process accelerated and increased the fragmentation tendencies and the possibilities for addressing the needs of a multicultural society. However, these trends did not involve the entire population. Some subgroups still wanted to keep the rigid identity of the Jewish State, fight for its existence, and isolate from the world. An extreme expression of this tendency was manifested by the assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by an extremist right-wing Israeli.

ISRAEL AS A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

The multicultural Israeli society can be defined according to three main characteristics: 1) an immigrant population, 2) a lack of segregation between state and religion, and 3) a large Arab-Palestinian minority.

Since its inception in 1948 the Jewish State has had its gates open to all of the world's Jews. With the law of return, many Jews from the Diaspora immigrated to Israel in the fifties. Consequently, there are subgroups with substantial cultural and class differences among the Jewish citizens of Israel. Jews comprise 79% of Israeli citizens. The main division is between Ashkenazim (whose origins are rooted in European and American countries) and Sephardim (who generally came from Africa and Asia). This general division does not fully describe the diversity of subgroups and their features. For example, an Iraqi Jew is quite different in his or her way of thinking and attitudes from a Moroccan Jew, even though both are Sephardim.

This multicultural heterogeneity could have led to tolerance and mutual acceptance, but it has not. The Sephardim have many complaints about longstanding discrimination against them. They feel that one of the reasons that the Ashkenazim built the model of the Israeli "Sabra" was to erase the Sephardim's identity. Their counter-reaction was to reinforce their traditional identity and maintain high community cohesion.

The disintegration and disillusionment processes are expressed not only in the Ashkenazim/Sephardim split, but also between religious and secular Jews. Again, the actual division is more complicated because there are so many subgroups among the religious Jews. Most of the tension exists between the secular and the extremely religious Jews (Haredim) who do not serve in the army but get many financial benefits from the government. This issue becomes even more complicated because many of the religious Jews are identified with a politically extreme right-wing ideology and populate the settlements behind the green line (the border before the 1967 war). Thus religious variation becomes political differentiation as well.

Above all these issues hover the threat to the existence of the state of Israel, and its difficulties in relations with the Arabs. For years, the Arab countries were

Israel's main enemy, stimulating the annihilation anxieties and paranoid feelings about Israel facing another Holocaust. Each war, recurring in cycles of about a decade, enhanced the self-image of the Israelis as "David against Goliath" or "a small country surrounded by foes." Israel has faced terrorist threats for years. This, too, has contributed to shaping its attitude about the Palestinian identity. In more recent times, the Palestinians changed from terrorists, with whom every talk was a threat to the security of the state, to legitimate partners for negotiation. This process engendered upheaval for many Jewish Israelis, for whom negotiation with the PLO had been taboo. During the last twenty years, peace agreements and settlements were signed with two Arab countries and with the Palestinian Authorities, but the complete longed-for peace is still far away. This is a complex problem. Not only are the Arabs residing outside of Israel a major factor in the discord, but so are the Arab minority within Israel (about 20% of the population) who identify with, or as, Palestinians.

In summary, Israel has a traumatic and tumultuous background. The Holocaust and historical memories of persecutions and wars are ever-present; it is a multi-cultural, polarized country, in permanent inner and outer conflict. Ongoing issues of boundaries (marking rigid outside boundaries and blurring inner boundaries), territory, war and peace, and identity all contribute to the zeitgeist. These elements are all reflected in the large and small groups.

THE ISRAELI SOCIETY FROM A GROUP PERSPECTIVE

MacKenzie & Livesley (1983) have devised a model of how the group develops in stages. According to their model, groups evolve from engagement through differentiation to individuation. The process of establishing the young State of Israel, and the myths accompanying it fit the engagement stage in the MacKenzie and Livesley model. In the early days of the state, and in order to deal with the many threats from within and without, Israeli society was focused on creating rigid boundaries between Israel and its enemies while simultaneously promoting the myth of Israel as a melting pot that could assimilate all Jews. This myth was intended to blur differences and to create an imaginary solidarity through the illusionary image of the Israeli "Sabra"—a singular identity for a diverse population. However, over the years, and with the diminution of the external threat, Israeli society started dealing with the relationships within the large Israeli group. Developmentally, one can say that the group has begun to move into the "stage of differentiation." The overriding message was no longer "we are a united people" but "everyone has her or his own way." Acknowledging this diversity facilitated personal individuality, expressed in legitimization of different coteries, but undermined the perception of the state as a secure container.

The readiness for more self-examination after the Yom Kippur War of 1973 can be seen as characteristic of the third stage in the group developmental theory

of MacKenzie and Livesley. In this stage of individuation the individual is ready to explore his or her inner world and recognize limitations. The readiness to collectively question issues that had been previously accepted as self-evident was probably a contributing factor to Israel's willingness to sign peace agreements with Arab countries.

When societies regress, their characteristics and dynamics become similar to those of the traumatized group. Under such conditions it is appropriate to infer findings from the study of groups to the study of societies. Equivalent processes, sometimes referred to as "parallel processes," become ubiquitous.

Bion (1961) described the strong regressive unconscious powers activated in a group and divided them into three Basic Assumptions. With the establishment of the State of Israel, the operative basic assumption was "fight-flight." The collective solution was creating a strong authoritative leadership that would help defend against the existential threat and provide for the security needs of the people. This assumption had a basis in reality because there was an actual danger of annihilation. This is the reason that Israelis had difficulties seeing the reality distortions of this assumption. As mentioned before, the Six-Day War only strengthened the paranoid attitude and prevented self-observation. This illusion of security and the euphoria of power were maintained until the Yom Kippur War. The crack in the safe container following that war split social groups in Israel, strengthened ethnic differences, increased social alienation and violence (Le Roy, 1994), and encouraged a process of "Us vs. Them" by seeing the "other" as a dangerous enemy (Berman, Berger, & Gutmann, 2000).

Israel, throughout its existence, has been beset by incidents of terror and violence. This state of affairs has strengthened the basic assumption of dependency, and the yearning for strong leadership (Nuttman-Shwartz, Karniel-Lauer, & Dassa-Shindler, 1998). There are two opposing mechanisms for dealing with the existential threat. The first involved the creation of a national ideological movement that reflected the fourth basic assumption of "One-ness" (Turquet, 1974). Referring to the large group, Turquet wrote that, "the group member is there to be lost in oceanic feelings of unity or, if the oneness is filled, to be a part of a salvationist inclusion" (1974, p. 360). The opposing fifth basic assumption of Me-ness (Lawrence, Bain, & Gould, 1996) operates as well, and is manifested by selfishness and a lack of attention to community interests: "The individuals who feel that it has become dangerous to rely on any social structure thus emphasize the 'I' and do not recognize the value of the group. They feel that their self is of utmost importance and strive to protect it and fortify themselves within it" (Lawrence et al., 1996). Hopper (1997) combines these two basic assumptions into one. He suggests that the fourth basic assumption in the unconscious life of groups and group-like social systems is actually bipolar. He refers to Incohesion: Aggregation/Massification in which systems can be seen to oscillate between these two polarities, i.e. One-ness or massification, and Me-ness or aggregation. This assumption in the unconscious life of social systems and the processes associated with it is especially important in

traumatized social systems. When a society has been traumatized, organizations and groups, including therapeutic groups, manifest the fourth basic assumption (Hopper, 1997). This explains why many features of Israeli social, cultural, and political life evince patterns of oscillation between massification and aggregation, without seeming to develop further. This is similar to the type of traumatic experience associated with incomplete and inauthentic mourning.

ISRAELI IDENTITY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PARTICIPANTS AND GROUP LEADERS

Understanding group processes in Israel must start with understanding the Israeli identity. The combination of the traumatic background and the small size of the country generate in the overall population, and in group members in particular, strong emotions of cohesion and belonging. It resembles an enmeshed family; when one member catches cold, the other sneezes. When a soldier is injured, all the population worries about his situation. Some of this is massification as a defense against aggregation in response to traumatic experience (Hopper, 1997). This closeness and cohesiveness creates a sense of closeness among members in the group and between members and leaders. The atmosphere in the group tends to reflect the implicit belief that "we all served in the same army and know each other." Within the therapeutic community, this mobility can create multiple-role situations, for example, a leader in one group with a participant may reverse roles with him or her in another group. Blurred boundaries make it difficult to create an adequate container and therapeutic space.

Social Events Reflected in Groups and their Effect on Boundaries

The social processes in Israel are strong and affect everyone. It is impossible to stay indifferent when terrorist attacks occur and the bloody scenes appear on Television. These strong emotions penetrate the therapy group, influencing members and leaders as well. It is difficult to differentiate between the "professional" identity and the attitudes, values and Israeli identity of the leader in these situations. The boundaries of the leading unit are fluid and cannot avoid the penetration of the "there" and "then" into the group (Hopper, 1996).

The difficulty facing a group leader in Israel is exemplified in the following vignette.

In an experiential group of university students meeting once a week for a semester, there were 13 Israelis and one Palestinian. It was a time of everyday skirmishes and regular terrorist acts between Palestinians and Israelis. In one session the male participant declared that he was going to be away for the next month to serve in the army reserve. Most of the group members were worried whether he would be in dangerous places. Later the Palestinian said, "I hesitated whether to share this with you: I am afraid of the Jews. When you said that you are going to the army reserve, I thought, are you going to kill my people?" A long

silence followed. Then another member said, "So let me tell you how I feel. I am afraid of you, the Arabs. My husband is going to the army too, and I am afraid he will be killed." The leader, who was a Jew, felt it almost impossible to separate his personal reactions from his professional ones.

Difficulty with Authority

Having to continuously face problems of boundaries, territory and existential threat has turned Israelis into local patriots. Loyalty to the country is deep and for years those who emigrated abroad were considered almost traitors. There is also envy of those emigrating. This deep conflict of attraction-repulsion common in the national identity, expresses itself in boundary testing. This testing is manifest in therapy groups by lateness, absences, acting out, and other attempts to breach the setting. The boundary testing and confrontation of the leader never end; one sees this in the emphasis that Israelis put on independence, individuality, and arrogance. Israelis think everyone can be a general. This emphasis on independence may reflect early failure of parenting, and failure of previous generations to be attuned to the needs of the youngsters because they were busy "establishing the state."

When Morris Nitsun (author of "The Anti Group," 1996) led a workshop in Israel in 1997, he told one of us that he had never faced a situation where participants in the workshop approached him during the break to tell him how he should lead it. Israelis are ambivalent towards "famous names," especially from abroad. On one hand, the guest is perceived with higher status and more knowledge. On the other hand, the participants try to show her or him that they know better. The persistent struggle against authority probably reflects generations of Jews being at the mercy of other authorities. It is difficult for Israelis to understand that visitors from abroad need more help and guidance than it appears.

The Image of the 'Sabra' Reflected in the Group

The Israeli "Sabra" is well known for his outside roughness. Against the image of the Jew from the Diaspora, who was perceived as weak, the Israeli male developed an armor of external strength. The existential struggle amplified the need to look strong. Thus, the socially desirable behavior in Israel suits the ethos of the "Sabra": to be a strong, modern warrior. Although this model serves the need for an antithesis to the Jew from the Diaspora, it denies the many cultures that exist in Israel. This model strengthens the Ashkenazic elite and disregards the ethnical diversity.

In a therapy group two out of ten members were Sephardim. One of these two had often presented himself as helpless loser, and had used group time to describe all of his failures. When he was fired from his job, he asked the group to solve his problem. The other Sephardic member could not tolerate his helplessness and shouted at him to "speak like a man!" The helpless member's expression of failure and weakness had evoked the inferiority he himself had felt in his childhood as a Sephardic.

This example reflects the social conflict between Sephardim and Ashkenazim that still exists today, and the desire of some Sephardim to adopt the “Sabra” model.

The ‘Sabra’ ethos also encourages gender splitting. Attitudes attributed to women such as warmth, support, nurturing, and sensitivity, are unacceptable for the “Sabra” (the “fighter” ethos). Small wonder that it is difficult to find men revealing their emotions or showing sensitivity in a group. It requires more than a usual degree of therapeutic encouragement to coax them to get in touch with their emotional and inner world. As we will see later, this process is also important in light of the fact that most of the group therapists in Israel are women.

Another influence of Israeli history is reflected in the belief that “the whole world is against us.” It became a slogan after the Six-Day War, when many countries condemned Israel and even enforced an embargo. In truth, this belief has deep roots in the persecutions that Jews have experienced for centuries. One might say that the Israeli perceives the “other” through a paranoid lens (which has been justified and contributed to survival at times). This phenomenon reflects itself in the group when members are sure that others talk about them after the group finishes.

The multicultural tensions of Israeli existence, and its polarities, challenge the leader to create an adequate holding environment and containing space. The aggression, violence, and tendency to identify the other as the enemy, work against a group culture of understanding, dialogue, healing.

TRAINING AND CONTINUING EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The differentiation between group work and group therapy in Israel is poorly defined. There is no requirement in Israel for special group therapy training (Weinberg, 2000) and no certification for group leaders or therapists. Actually, until recently, there were no specific training programs for group therapy. Graduates in psychology, social work, educational counseling, and other helping professions have had to learn about group dynamics and group interventions in their more generalized academic studies. Recent years have seen a significant growth in training programs for group leaders in universities, colleges, seminars for teachers, and private institutes. Postgraduate programs lasting one to two years, with practicums focused on leading groups and receiving supervision have become available and valued (see for example Nuttman-Shwartz & Shay, 1998). The information gathered from the Israeli Association of Group Therapy shows that most group leaders are women, and that they represent diverse psychotherapy professions. Most hold an M.A degree and are between the ages of 45–55. It seems that group therapists in Israel tend to have rich personal and professional backgrounds.

British theories, primarily those of Bion, are dominant in Israeli group training. Leaders learn primarily psychodynamic, experiential, and open-group styles and modalities (in contrast to task-oriented, time-limited focused groups). Even the programs that focus more on task groups are increasingly utilizing the psychodynamic approach to groups. Bion’s approach to groups in its Israeli application

encourages the growth of an authoritative, powerful leader, possessing perceived omnipotence. This suits the Israeli myths of leadership based on militaristic authoritative models and the longing for a powerful father to defend against outside threats. In recent years, due to increased openness to the world, training has expanded to include more theoreticians from the United States and England, such as Yalom and Foulkes. Though quite different, both of them build on a more humanistic approach and encourage dialogue.

Another interesting aspect of group-leader- training in Israel is the preferences for co-leading. In most of the training programs, the student begins the experience of co-leading as an “apprentice” to a senior leader. The next step is co-leading with another advanced apprentice. After completion of training, leaders continue to prefer co-leadership. Co-leadership may be viewed as necessary in order to provide adequate containment with the intensely emotional groups characteristic of Israel, such as those dealing with trauma, bereavement, terrorism and the Holocaust. This need seems to reflect more fear than is generally acknowledged, as well as an uncertainty about the competence of any single leader.

In addition to these training programs, there is a tradition of continuing education for group leaders in seminars, lectures, conferences and workshops. Many are in collaboration between the Israeli Association of Group Psychotherapy and the training institutes. For example, the subject of the last conference, in 1999, was “Groups in a Multicultural Society.” And last year (2000), Israel hosted the International Conference of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy in Jerusalem. Over 100 Israelis contributed to this conference by leading workshops and lecturing. In conjunction with universal themes, such as envy and generosity in groups, or the dynamics of co-leading, there were many subjects applicable to Israeli society specifically, such as the implications of the Holocaust, conflict and dialogue among social groups, and group treatment for terrorist attack survivors.

In the last few years, psychoanalytic institutes and academic schools of psychotherapy have started training programs for group therapists. Training in group analysis for senior group leaders is in its initial stages as well. There are numerous signs of deepening group expertise in Israel. Israelis are participating in international conferences, are building a unique group psychotherapy website and discussion list on the Internet (by one of the authors), and are increasing their contributions to professional journals. This special issue continues this trend.

AFTERMATH AND FUTURE THOUGHTS

The State of Israel was born from the traumatic background of the Holocaust and centuries of persecution. The Israeli Society can be perceived as moving along two parallel axes: the intergroup, and the intragroup. The intergroup axis is enhanced by existential threats stemming from security problems. It is expressed by emphasizing the enemy outside the country, and distinguishing between Israel

and the world. The intragroup axis is facilitated by global trends toward legitimizing cultural and ethnical differences. The Israeli group world is influenced by its existence in a multicultural, polarized state, always in internal and external conflict, and obsessed with dilemmas of boundaries, territory and identity. We can describe the Israeli society as a group frozen in pseudo-cohesion due to external threats. The permanent preoccupation with issues of survival prevents a process of differentiation that could ultimately lead to a fuller development.

The Israeli-Jewish poet Saul Tshernichovsky wrote in one of his poems, "The person is patterned after the scope of his homeland." In the same way, group therapy in Israeli society reflects attitudes, myths, and themes that have been characteristic of the State from its birth. These influences can be observed in both the participants and the group leaders. The leaders strive to balance authority and competent leadership, and this is an ongoing challenge. Groups in Israel are mostly short-term, fitting into the Israeli tempo, and focused on "Israeli" areas of problems such as trauma, conflict, and dialogue. The group process is characterized by subgroup tension and a tendency to challenge authority within the larger context of a necessary cohesion.

This examination of the development of group psychotherapy in Israel within the perspective of the development of Israeli society leaves us with questions about whether the group can serve as an intermediary between the individual and society. Could there be an inverted influence, so that the power of group knowledge helps the Israeli society become "a normal one" and facilitates dialogue across differences to reduce gaps? Can we use group therapy and group interventions to influence Israeli society? How can we develop a model of a multicultural society that acknowledges differences as a rich resource, rather than a threat, and supports cultural, class, ethnic, religious, and gender differences?

The Israeli group therapy community has expanded its professional boundaries in the last few years through participating in international congresses and activities, and collaborating with colleagues from abroad. Will this trend create a new professional space and facilitate a reduction of the boundary blurring between group leaders and their groups?

After reviewing my portrait of group leaders in Israel some other questions also arise: Does the profile of the group leaders impact the themes of the groups, or the integration of social issues into group work? For years the image of the rough Israeli "Sabra" predominated in the behavior of Israelis and had its effect on group participants and leaders. This pattern has softened lately. Will this trend continue, and if it does, what will be the ultimate impact?

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