

Response to Nina K. Thomas and J. Scott Rutan: Is the Personal Political? And Who Benefits From Believing It Is Not?

DAPHNA JOEL

Reading Thomas's and Rutan's responses to "Consciousness-Raising in a Gender Conflict Group" (this issue) raised many thoughts as well as the urge to answer every comment in detail. Instead, I discuss the deeper issues I think Thomas's and Rutan's comments touch upon, namely, complexity and multiplicity in groups and issues of power. Although the original article was written by both Dana Yarimi and me, we decided that only I would respond here because the model was developed by me and because, of the two of us, only I have led such groups.

There are different types of groups and, as pointed out by Thomas and Rutan, consciousness-raising gender conflict groups are different from psychodynamic therapy groups in their aims, the setting, the style of group leadership, and the relations between the group leader and group members outside the group. Yet, some processes are common to all groups, even if they are not in their focus. I argue below that just as "*all* new groups have to say 'hello,'" as Rutan nicely puts it, all group members, including group leaders, belong to social categories (e.g., gender, race), and these affect their perceptions, feelings, and reactions. Ac-

knowledging this fact does not mean that psychodynamic therapy groups should focus on social identity, but that the group leaders of such groups should keep this fact in mind, just as group leaders of conflict groups should keep in mind other essential elements, even though these elements are not the focus of the group. In our article, we chose to focus only on themes unique to consciousness-raising gender conflict groups.

COMPLEXITY AND MULTIPLICITY IN GROUPS: THE GROUP LEADER AS A CHOICE MAKER

The behavior of humans is shaped by a complex interplay of myriad intrapsychic, interpersonal, and social factors and processes. Thus, I could not agree more with Thomas's statement that the "social construction [of gender] is interpenetrated by culture, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation as well as economic status, among other forces" as well as with Rutan's assertion that psychodynamic processes are occurring also in consciousness-raising gender conflict groups. Acknowledging this complexity and multiplicity means that regardless of group type it is impossible to relate to all the factors that are acting at a given moment. Thus, while I share the psychodynamic belief in the unconscious of groups, I do not think of it as "The One," waiting to be revealed by the group leader, but rather as complex and multiple, only aspects of which can be captured by an intervention. To use an analogy, intervention is to group reality as a single factor of a factor analysis is to the actual data. They both likely capture an important aspect of reality, but they can never capture its full complexity.

I thus hold that group leading is always about choosing which aspects to highlight and which to ignore. I use choice here in a very general sense, to relate to any process that leads us to relate to only some aspects of a situation. Even the simplest sensory perception is a result of choice (which stimuli will be further processed, for instance) and interpretation (as demonstrated, for example, in visual illusions), and as such reflects the interaction of reality and its construction. Similarly, our perceptions of, and responses to, the behavior of group members are affected by our explicit goals as well as by unconscious processes, schemas, as-

sumptions, and other factors that are often “transparent” to us. By transparent I refer both to knowing something but believing it has no meaning (e.g., knowing I am a man/woman), as well as to treating things as universal truths when in fact they are merely untested assumptions or myths (e.g., everyone can speak up if things bother them).

I think the issue of choice and how it is affected by the unavoidable interactions between explicit goals and transparent biases is demonstrated in Thomas’s and Rutan’s responses to our paper. Clearly, they could not have related to every aspect of the paper and every example from the group. They had to *choose*. By and large, the gender-specific examples and concerns they raise relate to men and not to women. I interpret this unintended gender bias to demonstrate that being a woman and/or liberal and/or feminist, as well as knowing that one effect of living in a patriarchal society is that males’ issues are privileged over females’ issues, does not inoculate one against these effects. So the answer to Thomas’s question—“That their aim is to have participants put a question mark after their perceptions is valuable. Have they kept this in mind for themselves?”—is, “Yes.” The problem is, however, I believe I have not done a great job in doing so because it is so much easier to detect someone else’s biases than one’s own.

Following from the question of choice is the question of effect. Because the group leader reacts to, reflects, or highlights only some events and processes, s/he has the potential to affect the course of the group, even if not as intended. Whatever a group leader says, or conveys using other means, is therefore an *act of interpretation*, even if content-wise it seems to be a mere reflection. Group leaders are not passive and neutral vehicles of perception and reflection, but rather one of the forces acting in and on the group.

ISSUES OF POWER IN GROUPS: GROUP LEADER OR GROUP FOLLOWER?

Reading Rutan’s comments distinguishing between a “group leader” and a “group follower” suggests that the questions of choice and effect apply to only some kinds of groups. Rutan writes:

One role of the group therapist is to listen for the themes and messages conveyed by the flow of group process and to help the group members become conscious of those deeper issues. To that end, group therapists are not group *leaders* so much as group *followers*. We let the group go where it goes (for the most part), trusting that the group process will take the group where it needs to go, and that becomes a significant part of the data of the group. (p. 72)

This implies that the group therapist is neutral and mostly passive, reflecting the true deeper issues and following the group where it should naturally go. Countertransference is viewed as the exception, occurring when the therapist fails to maintain her/his otherwise neutral point of view. Rutan contrasts this “group follower” with “group leaders,” whom he depicts as “drivers of the group bus, clearly shaping the group process to focus on the particular goals of their class.” Such “group leaders” have an agenda that biases their vision and an intervention style that affects the course of the group, distracting it from where it needs to go. Thomas raises a similar concern regarding the style of group leading in the group described in the paper. Clearly, I disagree with this distinction.

I see the opposition of the “group follower” with the “group leader” as an attempt to claim neutrality and deny acts of power. Moving this discussion from the personal to the political, I argue that disguising acts of power is not only a matter of personal style, but that it serves the interests of the hegemonic group. By contrast, it is in the interest of the non-hegemonic groups to uncover the subjectivity and power that preserve the domination of the hegemonic group, of whatever category. I strongly believe that the hegemonic standpoint is typically misperceived as the neutral one. I also believe the course of groups reflects, among other factors, a power struggle between participants over group resources (time, appreciation, love, attention, etc.). Of course, this power struggle, as well as where the group went, can provide material for work and interpretation. Yet, presenting or perceiving things as “natural” and “as they should be” obscures the power struggle and serves the dominant group by presenting its domination as natural and inevitable. Relatedly, denying acts of power fosters the view that the current situation reflects the natural and inevi-

table development of the group rather than being a result of acts of power.

It is in the context of reluctance to acknowledge the power struggle between dominant and subordinate subgroups that I would like to relate to Rutan's statement, "But even groups that focus on conflict need to do so in an atmosphere of group cohesion." Although achieving a safe atmosphere is key to achieving the group's aims, one should always ask oneself whom s/he is serving by avoiding conflicts—the entire group or the hegemonic group. Research on conflict groups (Sonnenschein, Halabi, & Friedman, 1998) reveals that members of the subordinate group (e.g., Arabs) strive to make the conflict explicit, whereas members of the hegemonic group (e.g., Jews) typically want to avoid confrontation and conflict, keep the atmosphere pleasant, and keep the discussion on a personal and universal level. Helping the subordinate group make the conflict explicit is crucial in striving to create a safe atmosphere for *all* group members. It is especially important in gender conflict groups because the power relations between men and women are more implicit and often denied.

Both Rutan and Thomas state that the aim of consciousness-raising gender conflict groups is identifying male dominance. I hold, rather, that the aim is to understand how living in a gendered world affects us, but that to reach this aim one first has to acknowledge that gender in our world is a system of power relations and be able to see how these power relations are related to her/him. Specifically, men need to realize that by belonging to the hegemonic group they have power over others, even if they do not wish it. As Thomas notes, women have to realize the power they attribute to men and the submissive position they often adopt in interactions with them. Importantly, most people belong to both dominant and subordinate groups because we belong to many social categories, as for example, a straight White woman, a gay Black man. The two sides of the coin are relevant to most people, but they do not cancel out. That is, being a white woman does not mean being neutral because belonging to a subordinate category (woman) cancels out belonging to a dominant category (White). It means being dominant in some situations and subordinate in others. In consciousness-raising gender conflict

groups participants can experience and discuss these positions and thus gain more freedom from, and control over, them.

This leads me to Thomas's concern that, "The problem here is that such an interpretation [of a situation in which the group discusses men's issues as reflecting men's domination] might render men unable to voice their concerns without being interpreted as domineering and forcing their agenda" (pp. 78–79). Thomas points here to an important problem. How can a member of a dominant group of whatever category be involved in a mixed group without being dominant, or perceived as such? This question still troubles feminists because there is no agreed-upon solution. From my experience, men and the group as a whole often find their solutions, but this takes time, during which some of the men may mostly refrain from talking. It is noteworthy that whereas the latter is perceived as a major problem, it seems natural that women sit quietly letting the men run the show—Thomas's only comment regarding possible effects on women is, "The women in the group might well have gained a great deal from hearing males' struggles with altering their self-concept" (p. 80). As detailed in the article, one of the tasks of the group leader is to help men see their conflict and find ways to participate in the group and to help women deal with their conflicts about power. This is one of the reasons I prefer to use mixed, rather than single-gender, groups.

CONCLUDING REMARK: WHAT IS THIS GOOD FOR?

This is a question I often ask myself and that group members always ask, especially in the initial stages of the group. There is pain in realizing one belongs to the subordinate group and shame in understanding one belongs to the dominant group; it may be painful and embarrassing to "meet" the internalized representations of "a man" and "a woman." It is painful to start detecting patriarchy everywhere and realize how it affects so many aspects of one's life. It is frustrating to understand how difficult it would be to change it. Why bother then? It is because as Goldner, cited in Thomas's response, so clearly describes, imposing a dichotomous and hierarchical gender system is harmful for both males and females, bringing distress and suffering. It is my expe-

rience that traversing the painful path to self-awareness leads to greater freedom from gender and other social systems. Clearly, participating in a consciousness-raising gender conflict group is only one step in a long journey toward finding one's solutions to the problem that gender poses.

REFERENCES

- Goldner, V. (2011) Trans: Gender in free fall. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 21, 159-171.
- Rutan J. S. (2014). Commentary on "Consciousness-Raising in a Gender Conflict Group." *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 64(1), 71-75.
- Sonnenschein, N., Halabi, R., & Friedman, A. (1998). Israeli-Palestinian workshops: Legitimation of national identity and change in power relationships. In E. Weiner (Ed.), *The handbook of interethnic coexistence* (pp. 600-614). New York: Continuum.
- Thomas, N. K. (2014). The personal is political: Gender stereotypes in the unconscious life of groups: Commentary on "Consciousness-Raising in a Gender Conflict Group." *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy*, 64(1), 77-81.