

## **The Individual, the Group and Nature**

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### **Abstract**

In this article, the author proposes to consider the complexity of the interconnections between individual, group and nature. Is there a link between mental representations of nature and psychological well-being. If the child is not, and 'entity' separate from the mother, the individual can not be seen isolated from its physical world. The relationship with nature and fundamental emotional and psychological development. individuals and groups project on the natural world just as they do with the human world.

**Key words :** group, nature, the individual, connection, mental health

The connections between the Individual, the Group and Nature (1), are complex and deserve careful exploration. Splitting at a psychological level of any one element from either of the others creates difficulty or even danger. For example, splitting of individual from nature can result both in alienation of the individual and in destructive projections onto – and destructive actions towards – nature. Conversely, this splitting can lead to idealization of nature and consequent unrealistic actions towards the natural environment. In this issue many such splits are examined and in this paper I explore aspects of the overall issue of these splits and what they might mean. I begin by first examining the complexity of the issues that are raised when we have the courage to attempt to include the role of nature in our understanding of conversations with individuals and groups. The complexity and variety of issues raised when discussing Individual, Group and Nature are huge. Finding a starting point becomes difficult, so perhaps arbitrarily this paper starts with the question... What is signified by various forms of discourse where reference is made to nature?... At lunch on the first day of a two day workshop for the executive team of a government department, participants started talking about a recent fatal shark attack that had occurred at Perth's most popular swimming beach at the peak of the swimming season. The conversation then moved to include other shark attacks that had occurred at other beaches in the region over the last few years. Over a period of half an hour there was also discussion about crocodile attacks in popular tourist and holiday destinations in the north of Western Australia. I, as consultant/facilitator to the group, was curious about the significance of the conversation. There were so many possible interpretations. Were the two people who led the conversation unconsciously communicating about their own dangerous intrapsychic worlds? In other words, was the origin of this conversation an "individual" issue? Or was this whole discourse a group-level displacement of persecutory anxiety about intra-group destructiveness? Or maybe the group experienced me or their workplace, or the

current setting as dangerous? After all, the group had been displaced from their normal work environment to attend this residential workshop. All of these above interpretations were based on a view of the world that holds human relations at its centre and suggests that most of the psychic processes at work were projections of intrapsychic or intra-group material onto the physical world of sharks and beaches. But sharks are not human and nor are beaches or oceans. Could it be that instead of the discourse about shark and crocodile attacks being a symbolization of interpersonal and intrapsychic concerns there is another possibility that places nature at the centre of the human concerns? Was it possible that the recent dramatic increase in shark and crocodile attacks in our region was reducing the sense that Western Australia is a safe place for people? Perhaps the collective mental representation of a physically dangerous natural environment was being internalised. This latter interpretation at first seemed to contribute little to our task of improving the effectiveness of the executive team. Or did it? It might have been that in recognizing that individuals in the group as a whole were in search of a safe place in both the physical world and the psychological world that progress could be made? In short, there is a danger that we lose useful information and potential for doing good work if we interpret clients discourse about the natural world as only being relevant to their intra-group and intrapsychic worlds. This short anecdote illustrates some of the complexity of the connections between individual, group and nature in relation to a corporate workshop, but this issue of *Funzione Gamma* is intended to be relevant to people whose work involves therapy, education, community work and environmental work. Hence, it is useful to explore the connections between nature and mental health, the processes that promote splitting and the processes that work against splitting.

The connection between nature and mental health can be explored through paying attention to the role that mental representations of nature have in psychological well-being. My opinion is that they can contribute in an important way to mental health and so should not be overlooked. After all, how many times have you found psychological comfort in images of beautiful places that you visit or where you holiday? If you, then why not your clients and client groups? Experiencing oneself as connected to a physical place may well be a prerequisite to full mental health and so probably should be treated as being important in group and individual analysis. James Telfer suggests (in this issue), that just as Donald Winnicott observed that << *the baby can not sensibly be viewed as a separate entity from its mother, the adult human being cannot sensibly be viewed in isolation from his or her physical place in the World*>>. Could it be that the human psyche is not fully functional unless it has an internalised connection to one or more physical places in the world? This has interesting parallels with attachment theory, in that we could include the need for secure attachment relationships with physical places along with the need for attachment relationships with other humans. In the same vein, Marianne Spitzform (2000) describes << *the central role that relationships with nature have in the normal emotional and psychological development of human beings*>>. This can best be

summarized by including in our views of self-structure the idea of an ‘ecological self’. Anne Noonan (in this issue) even suggests that <<the pervasive mental representation of a landscape can have an effect on the collective psyche>>. What is understood by Western minds (2), to be a vast emptiness in the centre of Australia (the central deserts) creates its psychic equivalent in the Australian psyche. The resulting ‘Australian’ sense of internal emptiness may manifest itself in unhelpful ways. Similarly, there may be intrapsychic damage done from traumatic or unhealthy relationships with physical places that have been degraded by human influence. The traffic congestion on Auckland Harbour Bridge, the toxic algae blooms in the Swan River in Perth City and the toxic haze that hangs over many large cities in the world all come to mind. If we take seriously the connections between the individual and nature, it seems likely that repeated exposure to these real physical hazards will also negatively affect the health of the psyche. One step further takes us to the question of how natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes create an imprint on the psyche. So identification with Nature is both ubiquitous and has an effect on psychological well-being of individuals and groups. What about the reverse? Can projections of individuals and groups have an influence on nature? Whilst it is difficult to imagine a wolf or a bear taking part in the process of projective identification with a human, it does appear that splitting and projective processes have a real effect on the health of the natural world.

Individuals and groups project onto aspects of the natural world just as they do with the human world. The projections of groups and individuals onto nature can manifest themselves in changes to human behaviour towards the natural world and ecosystems within it. Uncontained hostile projections lead to hostile actions, and idealizing projections lead to unrealistic actions. Robert Hinshelwood described in an earlier paper the way in which << *mental representations of English society influenced the way in which ‘the countryside’ was perceived and treated*>>. (Hinshelwood, 1993) . For instance, early industrialization with its resultant physical pollution and social degradation affected the collective mental representations about how unsafe or benign are cities and countryside respectively. These mental representations in turn, either sanction or prohibit at a societal level what kinds of environmental impacts are permissible. Marianne Spitzform’s article in this issue makes some interesting observations about how a proposal to re-introduce bears to a locality in America mobilized collective phantasies in the community and resulted in a strong antagonistic response to the proposal. Thus, a move to restore to an area some of the original elements of the ecology was blocked by a group response to a perceived threat. The threat was primarily a collective projection of fear onto the relatively few bears that were to be involved. In this case, bears were seen as destroyers of safety and projective processes were involved in a collective defense against anxiety. But destructiveness can also be internalised through introjective processes. Thus, not only do we damage Nature with the actions we take as a result of our uncontained projections, but also we damage ourselves with the resultant mental representation of Humankind as a destroyer of nature. The destructiveness of humankind is

communicated daily by the media and in our conversations with each other. We are attacking and destroying the Earth; the 'body' from which we were born. The parallel between this and the Kleinian (1997 (1975)) paranoid schizoid position in relation to the mother is too close to ignore. At a societal level we will and do internalise the 'destroyer'. Humankind is routinely understood as destructive and dangerous. This view, whilst having an element of objective truth, is in itself dangerous. In the words of Alison Rush (2000, p. 16) .<<*In Kleinian terms, the fear is that the depleted breast cannot recover, that the envious attack has caused permanent damage to the nurturing environment, that love cannot conquer hate, gratitude cannot mitigate envy. Fear of irreversible environmental disaster, consequential on the greenhouse effect and climate change, is a constant theme and reflects this deep-seated anxiety*>>. It may become impossible to contain the anxiety that emerges from the perception of self-as-destroyer and we will look for people and organizations onto which we project the destruction. I believe that this dynamic is already visible in the extreme views of militant environmental movements. In this (Kleinian) conceptual framework, healing occurs through adoption of the depressive position. Reparation and guilt mobilize remedial actions. Quite how we reach this position at a societal level is not clear to me but the question is worth asking because a pervasive theme that appears in the papers in this issue is that of splitting, projection and maladaptive responses to a lack of integration between the Individual, the Group and Nature. So what reduces the connectedness in everyday life that we can or could experience between ourselves, others and nature? Perhaps a part of the problem lies in the processes that we necessarily use in everyday life to maintain adequate levels of simplicity. Emotional and psychological equilibrium become impossible when we are faced with too much complexity. This same process of simplification may also reduce our ability to work effectively in groups. In particular, the need to have an internal experience of psychic continuity and boundedness may reduce our ability to identify with wider parts of the world. Too many internal representations of the external world can be overwhelming, particularly when some of them evoke anxiety. The simple solution to resolving the tension between a 'simple enough' internal world and the need to relate to a wide and complex reality is to deny the unbearable nature of the complexity and project one's anxiety onto the nearest available object. This leads to destructive functioning but achieves short term relief. In contrast, Spitzform (in this issue) suggests that <<*a key to our ability to relate in a useful way to the natural environment lies in recognizing the need to include non-human life forms in the category of possible internal objects. This in turn, requires mature psychological functioning*>>. But psychological maturity focuses on the individual. There are also factors in groups and in society that help to deal with excessive complexity and that promote effective integration of Individual with Group and with Nature. A theme that appeared in the papers submitted for this issue was the prevalence of an implicit undercurrent of what I would call spirituality. That is, a human solution to the inability to identify with the complexity of the world is to create an unconscious simplification of the phenomenon or 'object' with which we wish to identify. The



powerful but unconscious nature of this process gives the subject a strong intuitive sense of there being something 'greater than but connected to me.' The Gaia hypothesis is an example that comes to mind. Whilst it is now difficult to deny on scientific terms that the whole World is in some ways interconnected, the Gaia hypothesis phantasy level, creates a single 'object' of the Earth that enables the experiencer to identify with the whole world without becoming overwhelmed or losing one's sense of continuity. On a smaller scale, Claudio Neri's conceptualisation (in this issue) of the group Genius Loci enables the group and the leader to relate to the group as a whole. The 'spirit' of the Genius Loci provides a means of cathexis with the group without feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of the interactions in the group. Whilst referring to what I consider to a spiritual element of group, Neri does not use the term 'spirituality.' This is possible because in Western European terms, any mention of spirituality in psychoanalytic groups may raise suspicion of 'fringe' or 'new age' thinking. In contrast, many indigenous cultures such as the New Zealand Maori take for granted what Western Society would call 'spirituality.' In both Australian Aboriginal society, in New Zealand Maori tradition, as well as in many other 'aboriginal' societies, the divisions between the Individual, the Group, Nature and Spirit are neither rigid nor clearly articulated (See also Noonan, in this issue).

### **An illustration follows**

An illustration of a non-western view of connections between the Individual, the Group and Nature (3). I will summarize my experience of taking part of meetings in rural New Zealand during the 1980's. A meeting (hui) is called that involves decisions about both Maori and white (Pakeha) people in a small rural locality. The visitors to the village gather outside the gate of the marae (an enclosed area that includes a meeting house, an cookhouse and an ablution block). A senior woman member of the local tribe begins a cry of welcome (karanga) and the women visitors lead the men onto the marae. At the door to the main meeting house (whare nui), everyone takes off their shoes, and as the visitors enter they file up to the head of the house to pay respects to the photographs of the dead ancestors of the local tribe. Once visitors have sat (on mattresses around the floor of the whare nui). The whole group is now contained in the whare nui which "is" the body of a respected ancestor of the local tribe, with the door as his mouth. Three local elders (kaumatua) who are leaders in the community speak words of welcome, but the specific sequence of their welcome speeches (mihi) is very important in terms of the way in which Maori experience their connections between individual, group and nature. The structure of the mihi (spoken in Maori) is as follows:

A dramatic poetic statement that is usually specific to the area from which the speaker comes (A tauparapara)

A greeting to God

Greetings to the dead ancestors (tipuna) whose place of standing/identity (turangawaewae) was the local area

Greetings to a local spiritually significant river or ocean or lake

Greetings to a local spiritually significant hill or mountain

Greetings to the Marae

Greetings to the visitors (manuhiri)

A description of the speakers genealogy (whakapapa), starting back as far as the speaker can go

The speakers' name

A statement about the topic that the speaker will address during the meeting.

A song (waiata) led by the women. (A weak song can signal that the women do not fully support the speaker)

A short closing welcome by the speaker.

Of critical importance here is that the speaker gradually evolves his identity in his eyes and the eyes of those present by the following means:

Linking with the metaphoric and symbolic

Linking with the overarching spiritual existence

Linking with the spirits of ancestors

Linking with vital elements of Nature, which are considered to be alive

Linking with the spirit of the marae, which is considered to be alive

Linking with the visitors through a direct greeting, but more importantly, by naming people who may be common ancestors between the speaker and any of the visitors.

It is not until these links have been made that the speaker can have a name or identity for himself. He only exists in the context of Spirit, Nature and Group and his name is a relatively insignificant part of his overall identity in this context. A core element of Maori identity is the Turangawaewae – the place of standing/identity – originally this was also where the placenta of the person was buried. Whilst the Maori welcome ceremony described above may seem to most readers be a ‘special case’ it is not. This is normal protocol on Marae throughout New Zealand and is followed by both Maori and Pakeha. It is normal protocol in settings where important discussions happen with Maori people. Furthermore, there are elements in common between Maori welcome protocol and some other cultures whose spirituality is also ‘earth-based.’ But without the advantage of an ‘aboriginal’ spiritual base such as that held by some Maori, how can Western people maintain experiential links between the Individual, the group and Nature? Traditions such as those of the Maori can inform Western culture, but they do not belong to Western culture. We need to find authentic means ourselves of re-integrating individual, group and nature that are compatible with our cultural history. How can we function fully as members of groups and as responsible environmental citizens in a world that is indisputably being degraded faster than we can afford to allow? What enables us to manage our anxiety of discontinuity, fragmentation or being overwhelmed? There is a burgeoning industry that is based on taking groups into the natural environment for purposes that range from psychotherapy (Itin, 1997) to personal development and even to team development and increasing the effectiveness of organizations in “Development training.” Development training, adventure therapy and related experiential adventure-based group processes involve

interacting in positive ways in natural settings. The substantial intrapsychic changes that occur from experiencing oneself, the group and nature in positive ways has been well documented. However, adventure-based experiential learning has for too long been dominated by practitioners whose knowledge of group analysis is almost negligible. There is great potential for these two previously separate fields of endeavour (group analysis and adventure-based learning) to work together. Conventional group therapy can be expanded to harness the power of adventure therapy, and vice versa. Fortunately there are exceptions to the above separation of group analysis and experiential learning. Chris Loynes (in this issue) outlines ways in which “development trainers” can function with groups in natural settings in a way that assist participants find their sense of place. The existence of ‘Place’ as a positive self-object can have two functions. One is that it strengthens the intrapsychic world and the other is that it helps the integration of self with Nature and comes some way towards making the depressive position possible. Johnna Haskell (in this issue) addresses another aspect of integration in the domain of Individual, Group and Nature. Ideas of embodiment and embodied experiencing, are applied to integrate experiencing of self (in particular soma), other (in groups) and Nature. Hence, there is an integration of learning that is transformative. This form of learning in nature is offered in contrast to the conventional learning that occurs in classrooms. Even without taking groups into the natural environment, consideration of some of the concepts in this issue can stimulate therapists to widen their sphere or awareness so as to pay more attention to the role of place in the therapeutic milieu. Group members bring into the therapy room with them not only an internalised sense of who they are in relation to others, but also an internalised sense of who they are in relation to different places. But even the healers are vulnerable to damage projective and introjective processes related to the natural environment, and there is a useful place for psychoanalytic and group analytic thinking in the environmental movement. The total world-wide effort to encourage responsible environmental citizenship is huge but often struggles. Burnout is the majority experience (Rush, 2000) and resources are often not adequate to do the job. Perhaps many activists are projecting their disappointment with their internal worlds out onto the degraded environment and find that the slow and disappointing progress in the environmental movement exacerbates their pre-existing personal pain. Psychoanalytic understandings of the personal, work-group and collective experiences of environmental activists may help to harness the positive energy that comes from personal alienation with self, but diminish the negative effects like burnout. Specific community and environmental projects may also benefit from an astute assessment of the individual, group and societal patterns of unconscious processes that occur as the projects start, progress and experience their ups and downs.

### **In closing**

There are strong and pervasive influences that encourage us to compartmentalize and isolate the three aspects of human experience that are addressed in this issue: The

Individual, the Group and Nature. Clearly, the action of splitting one element from another carries with it significant costs in terms adequately understanding and relating to the world. This issue provides some fascinating food for thought regarding the fragmentation of and potential integration of these three elements of the Whole. Psychoanalysis was first intended to by Sigmund Freud to make the World a better place. Many analysts, group analysts, socio-analysts and those applying psychoanalysis to community concerns have continued with Freud's original wish. This issue of *Funzione Gamma* applies psychoanalytic and other perspectives to explore questions about how Human Beings can better understand the connections between individuals, groups and nature – the non-human world. In some way, this issue may make small progress with Freud's wish.

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### **Notes**

1) In this paper I use the word "nature" to signify non-human aspects of our environment, including constructions and modifications made to the environment by human beings (as such as buildings). This signification carries with it an unintended implicit split of "humankind" from "nature." In fact my view is that human beings are a part of the natural world.

2) It should be emphasised that the centre of Australia was not empty for Aboriginal Australians. For many of them it was home!

3) This is a personal account and is not meant to be a definitive guide to Marae protocol. For a more authoritative version see Tauroa (1986)



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