

Reaching for the Group Matrix?

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To study Man — the political animal — is to study a being linked in complex ways to surroundings of which the person is both an integral part and a distinct and unique individual. Before conception (and conceptualization) and after physical death *it* is organically a component of the universe. Between those gateways of conception, birth and death *he or she* is an individual member socially related in outer physical collective reality as well as in inner psychological reality. According to Freud (1921): 'Since the beginning, individual psychology has also been social psychology'. For Foulkes (1964) the individual man is a 'nodal point' in a 'network' field of relationships in space and time.

It is fully legitimate to limit the scope of study or thinking to one part of this ontological field — to the individual (as in most psychoanalytic research and theorizing) or to the family (the proxy group of the individual) or to the group network (as in social psychology or social psychiatry) — but it is not in accordance with our knowledge about the reality of man's existence to omit or forget these complex relationships when conceptualizing.

This is the point of departure for this paper. My focus here is the groupal or group-as-a-whole level of psychology — and my concepts and thinking constitute open systems regarding the individual as well as the societal levels. In other words, I ask the reader to consider psychoanalytical individual psychology, that is to say object-relations theories (see Kernberg, 1984; Klein, 1986; Kohut, 1978; Fairbairn, 1952; Winnicott, 1965, 1971; Bion, 1961) as necessary complements on the individual level to the group-analytic conceptualization I use on the groupal level. Theoretical bridge-makings between these levels of abstraction have been made by a growing number of authors (Pines, 1975; James, 1982; Agazarian and Peters, 1981; and Napolitani, 1980, and in my previous work: Ahlin, 1985). Bridge-making to the societal levels can be exemplified in the works of Hopper (1981) and Bosse (1985).

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The Matrix Concept

The group shows manifest interaction between its members on the basis of a latent shared ground. This common basis was named by Foulkes as the *Group Matrix*, which he defined as 'the hypothetical web of communications and relationships in a given group' and 'the common shared ground which ultimately determines meaning and significance of all events and upon which all communications and interpretations, verbal and nonverbal, rest'.

The *Group Matrix* concept according to Foulkes is thus an abstract construct, wide in its extensions and somewhat vague in its limitations. It can be described as metaphorical rather than meta-scientific, yet it is certainly intended for scientific use and is, maybe, the central concept in group-analytic thinking.

Various attempts were made by Foulkes himself to specify the Group Matrix concept better and by writers like Abraham (1973), Roberts (1983), Blake (1980), Lintott (1983) and van der Kleij (1985) as well as by myself. The Group Matrix plays an important part in Napolitani's (1980) discussion of the group-analytic aspects of psychoanalysis. These attempts have been what I would like to call '*analytic on the verbal or the linguistic level*'.

Only Abraham has — to my knowledge — applied the Group Matrix concept in some way to concrete research on groups, probably because the concept is difficult to make use of owing to its properties. Agazarian and Peters (1981) researched into the latent collective aspects of the group as a whole but under the heading of the 'invisible group' — a concept closely linked but hardly identical to the Group Matrix concept.

Approach to the Matrix Concept

In this paper I use a *diagrammatic approach* to represent the Group Matrix.

The Group Matrix of a given group at a given time has to be inferred by the person observing the group. For historical and other reasons it can be said that the whole concept is a *therapist's concept* and maybe ultimately more meaningful and useful to group conductors and to group-analytic theoreticians than to group members in general. For research purposes it is certainly beneficial if the observer is a person other than the conductor. I include in the term 'observer' both a participant observer (doing action research, for instance in the rôle of a group recorder) and an observer of video-

tape recordings or written (audio-taped) material from group sessions. The stress is on observation and not on participation.

Construction

The Matrix Representation Grid (MRG), which is the research tool I constructed, has been built up as follows. Generally speaking, we can observe a group that is loosely held together in a non-committal, superficial fashion even if so loosely that it is dubious whether the group is really a group or not. In it, the individuals are easily distinguished and prominent in different ways. In Figure 1 this type of group is represented by the outer circle. An observer may also notice the other extreme: a dense group, so closely held together that it seems to be one unit without any apparent distinguishing individuality in the members. The group seems to have merged. This is represented by the inner circle. Between these extremes a number of intermediary forms can be found. The middle ones could represent the 'working' group, here drawn as a third circle between the others.

What are the factors that together determine the form of appearance or, better, state of the group?

Therapeutic Group Determinants

Since my main interest in this paper focuses on therapeutic group-analytic groups it is reasonable to use group-specific therapeutic factors, that is, factors known to promote therapeutic changes in groups. ('Therapeutic' here may mean 'for better' as well as 'for worse', the evaluation depending on perspective, points of reference and so on.)

Group-specific therapeutic factors have been described by Yalom (1970) and other writers, and reviewed and partly reformulated by Bloch and Crouch (1985). I use the scheme proposed by Bloch and Crouch, although somehow differently defined. I propose to call these factors *determinants* — they determine the changes and developments of group states.

Since the Group Matrix is by definition what 'ultimately determines the meaning and significance of all events and the common shared basis and upon which all communications and interpretations rest' and since the Group Matrix is on the groupal level the equivalent of the unconscious, the relationships between the determinants and the Group Matrix are the same as between *derivatives*

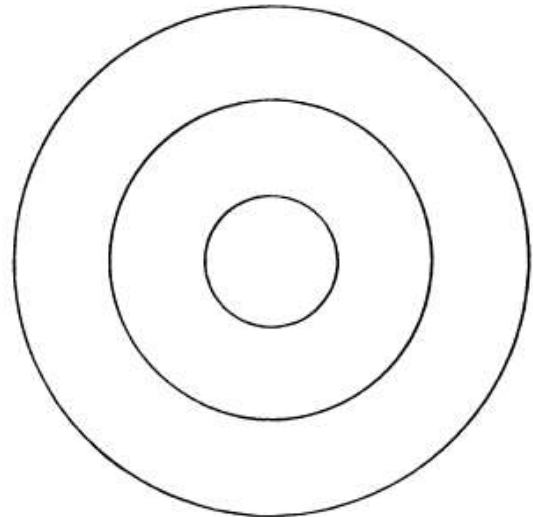


FIGURE 1

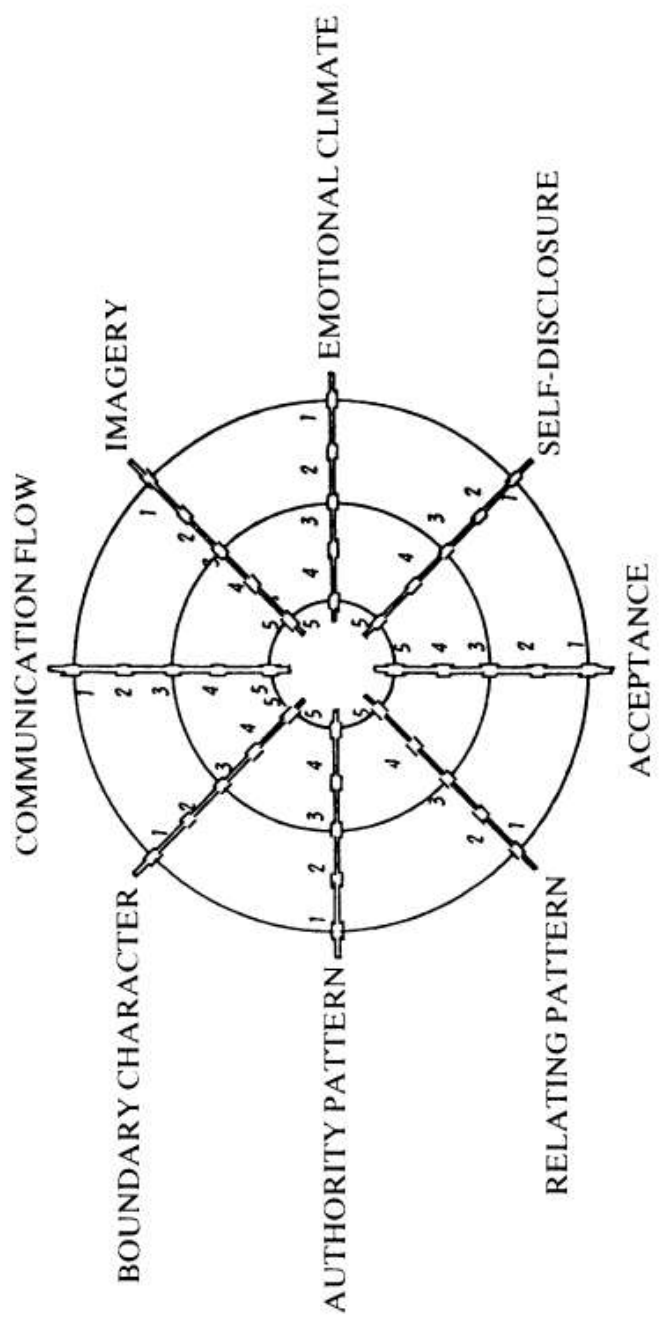


FIGURE 2
The Five Stations of the Determinants

and the *unconscious* in Langs' writings (1982) about individual psychology.

I have chosen eight determinants: (1) communication flow, (2) imagery (made use of in the group dialogue), (3) emotional climate, (4) self-disclosure, (5) acceptance, (6) relating pattern, (7) authority pattern and (8) boundary character.

The Grid

The eight determinants are drawn as eight radiating lines through the three concentric circles at a 45 degree angle to each other. Since each determinant appears in different forms and grades I have chosen to mark five 'stations' along each line, three at the point where the lines cross the circles, plus two more in between the three circles (Figures 2 and 3). The operational definitions of the characteristics of each station have been made so that the outer ones (no. 1) correspond to the general characteristics of the outer-circle-type group state and the innermost ones (no. 5) to the innermost circle, the dense and merged one (see Tables 1 and 2).

In spite of obvious overlaps between the eight determinants and between different stations, the definitions are made so that the items are distinguishable from each other. Their degree of independence from each other is also large enough to allow for variations in other determinants' stations to combine with one selected station. The reliability of the verbal discriminations between stations and determinants when used in actual research is being tested in a pilot study.

So far the paper has dealt with *general* determinants for group interaction and group dynamics in therapeutic group-analytic groups. Interaction in a given group at a given time is by necessity specifically determined by the actual *group theme* (corresponding to the *group-focal conflict* in the writings of Stock Whitaker and Liebermann, 1964, and Stock Whitaker, 1982). The influence and the form of appearances of the general group determinants are related to the prevailing group theme. Put in other words, I assume that the *relevant aspects of the group's matrix* (mediated via certain shapes of the determinants, forming the group interaction) are activated by the group theme.

Practical Usage of the Grid

The steps in using the MRG are as follows. First, a reasonable period of time to study is taken out of a group session: when

TABLE 1 Operational Definitions of the Matrix Representation Grid Stations

COMMUNICATION FLOW Level of verbal and non-verbal interaction Semi-quantitative	IMAGERY Expressed, (mainly) verbal, therapeutically significant content of group dialogue Qualitative	EMOTIONAL CLIMATE Observer's assessment of expressed feelings in group- as-a-whole Semi-quantitative	SELF-DISCLOSURE Amount in group of (mainly) verbal sharing of individual inner-worlds Semi-quantitative
1. <i>Silent</i> No verbal and small non-verbal exchange.	1. <i>Factual</i> Concrete facts exchanged. Also concrete advice.	1. <i>Indifferent</i> Hardly any or no expressions of feelings.	1. <i>Prevented</i> Inner worlds concealed in all the group. No revelation pressure shown.
2. <i>Low</i> Few, scattered verbal comments varied non-verbal.	2. <i>Anamnestic/clarifying</i> There-and-then outside group. Also clarifying, confronting.	2. <i>Detached</i> Restricted amounts of low- intensity feelings shown.	2. <i>Exceptional</i> Single members sometimes open up. Some group pressure for (others) to share intimate matters with the group.
3. <i>Fluent</i> Freely floating interchange. Few and short silences.	3. <i>Group mirroring/interpreting</i> Recalls shared group experiences. Interpretative work.	3. <i>Nurturing</i> Realistically varied fullness and level of feelings shown.	3. <i>Common</i> Self-revelation asked for and done selectively in all the group frequently.
4. <i>Vivid</i> Continuous rich exchange. No silences. Members talk one at a time.	4. <i>Metaphoric</i> Signifying object relations and not conscious conflict.	4. <i>Dense</i> High level of intense emotions of longer duration. Heightened anxiety.	4. <i>Dominating</i> High pressure for unrestricted openness. Attempts for privacy attacked by principle. Scapegoating may occur.
5. <i>Frantic</i> Excited, frequent interruptions. Members talk at the same time and fight for their say.	5. <i>Mythic</i> Dealing with archetypal, ethnic or basic cultural images.	5. <i>Overwhelming</i> Oppressive and exhaustive emotional climate. High anxiety. Psychosomatic reactions.	5. <i>Confessional</i> Uniform, excited even competitive level of revelations of pathology.

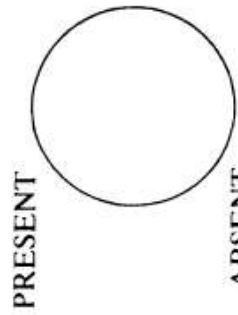
Matrix Representation Grid © G. Ahlin (1986)

TABLE 2 Operational Definitions of the Matrix Representation Grid Stations (continued)

ACCEPTANCE	RELATING PATTERN	AUTHORITY PATTERN	BOUNDARY CHARACTER
Cohesiveness and accepting and supporting climate in group Semi-qualitative	Dominating interpersonal modes of relating Semi-qualitative	Distribution of power, autonomy and dependency Qualitative	Amounts and qualities of interpersonal and groupal boundaries Semi-qualitative
1. <i>Scanty</i> Group loosely held together. Acceptance/support only from conductor.	1. <i>Social</i> Superficial and non-committal.	1. <i>Anarchistic</i> No authority accepted. Aggressive counter phobic dependency.	1. <i>Rigid-impermeable</i> Too many and too impermeable. Mainly low anxiety. Possibly paranoid climate. Closed.
2. <i>Partial</i> Cohesiveness and acceptance in subgroups mainly.	2. <i>Intellectual intercourse</i> Contact searching channeled to intellectual interaction.	2. <i>Laissez-faire</i> Vague, contradictory acceptance passively of unclear authority.	2. <i>Cautious</i> Exaggerated number or impermeability. Climate probably obsessional, semi-closed.
3. <i>General</i> We-feeling expressed in group generally. Caring for deviants shown.	3. <i>Reflective playing</i> Relating on fantasy and reality levels. Transferential on triangular level. (Tr 3)	3. <i>Egalitarian</i> Manifest striving for collectively shared responsibility and authority.	3. <i>Adequate</i> Reasonable amount, selectively flexible and permeable. Constructive open system. Moderate anxiety.
4. <i>Intense</i> Strong attachment and we-feelings. Some overprotection of deviants.	4. <i>Resonance acting</i> Obviously transferential interacting on dyadic levels. (Tr 2)	4. <i>Authoritative</i> 'Reasonable' authority accepted. May alternate though. Hierarchic.	4. <i>Over-permissive</i> Too few and too open. Identity diffusion and intrusive-exploitive atmosphere. Heightened anxiety.
5. <i>Engulfing</i> Overprotective uniformity. Symbiotic, merger climate. Deviants may be expelled.	5. <i>Ritualistic</i> Deep transferential acting on part-object and magic levels.	5. <i>Totalitarian</i> Constant omnipotent leader and enslaved followers. Dictatorial.	5. <i>Unbounded</i> Seemingly no functioning. Frequent transgressions of identities. Blurring. Group seems to dissolve in other systems.

SESSION no. DATE / TIME

GROUP THEME



- 1. Rigid, impermeable
- 2. Cautious
- 3. Adequate
- 4. Over-permissive
- 5. Unbounded

ABSENT

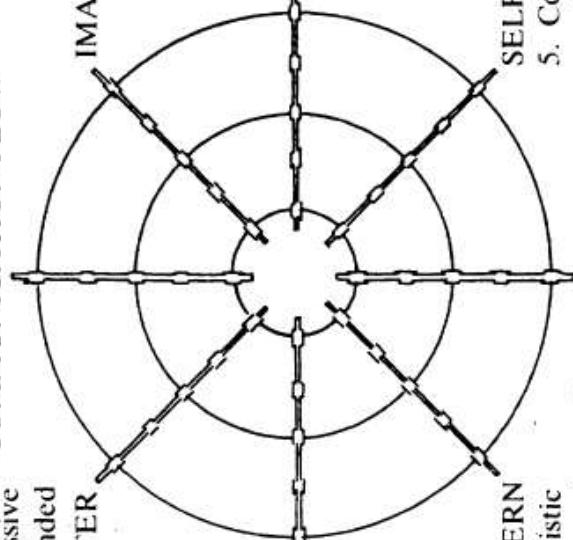
BOUNDARY CHARACTER

- 1. Silent
- 2. Low
- 3. Fluent
- 4. Vivid
- 5. Frantic

COMMUNICATION FLOW

IMAGERY

- 1. Factual
- 2. Anamnestic; clarifying
- 3. Group mirroring; interpreting
- 4. Metaphoric
- 5. Mythic



AUTHORITY PATTERN

- 1. Anarchistic
- 3. Egalitarian
- 5. Totalitarian
- 2. Laissez-faire
- 4. Authoritative

RELATING PATTERN

- 5. Ritualistic
- 4. Resonance acting; tr 2
- 3. Reflective playing; tr 3
- 2. Intellectual intercourse
- 1. Social

ACCEPTANCE

- 5. Engulfing
- 4. Intense
- 3. General
- 2. Partial
- 1. Scanty

SELF-DISCLOSURE

- 5. Confessional
- 4. Dominating
- 3. Common
- 2. Exceptional
- 1. Prevented

EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

- 5. Overwhelming
- 3. Nurturing
- 1. Indifferent
- 4. Dense
- 2. Detached

GROUP NAME

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FIGURE 3 Matrix Representation Grid

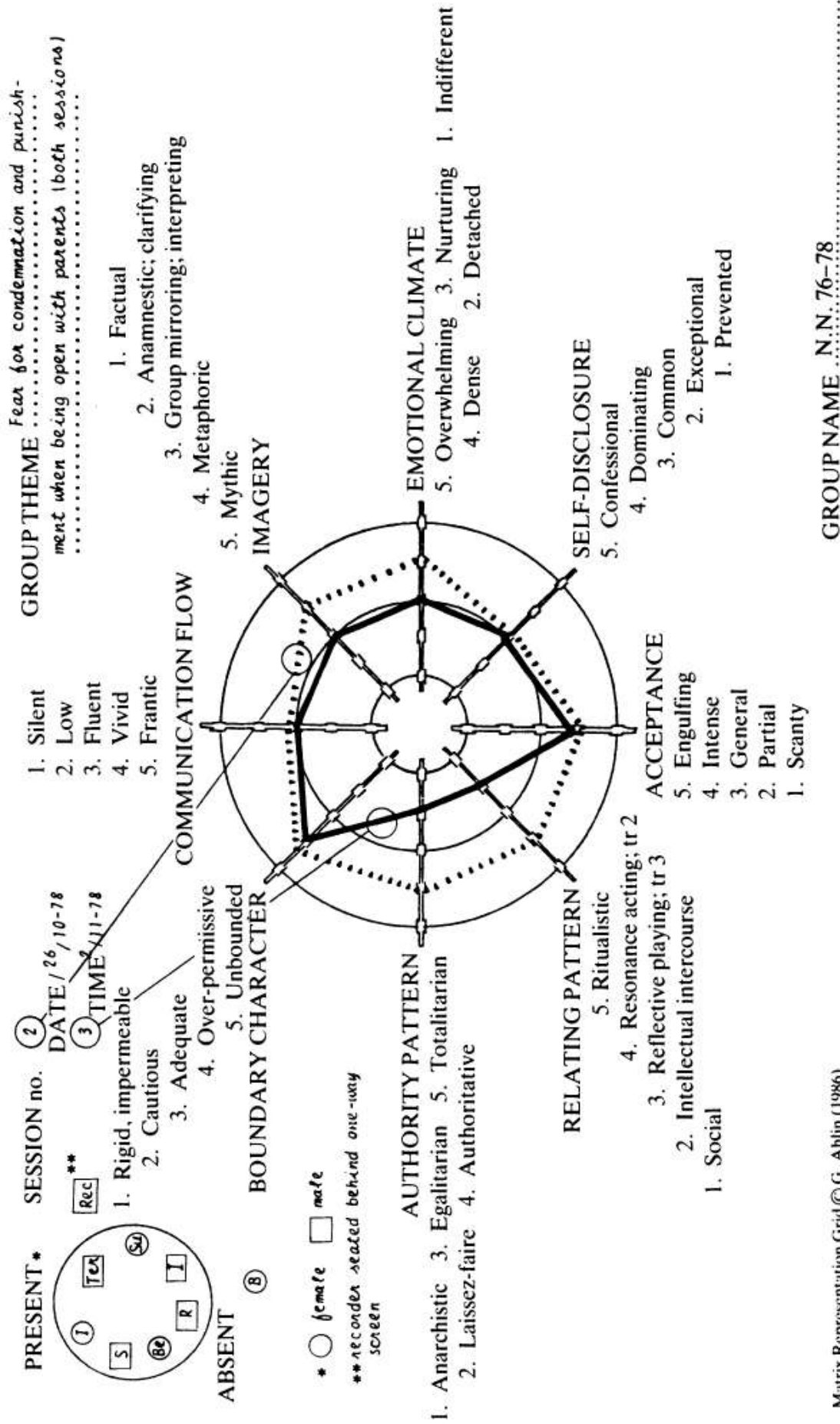
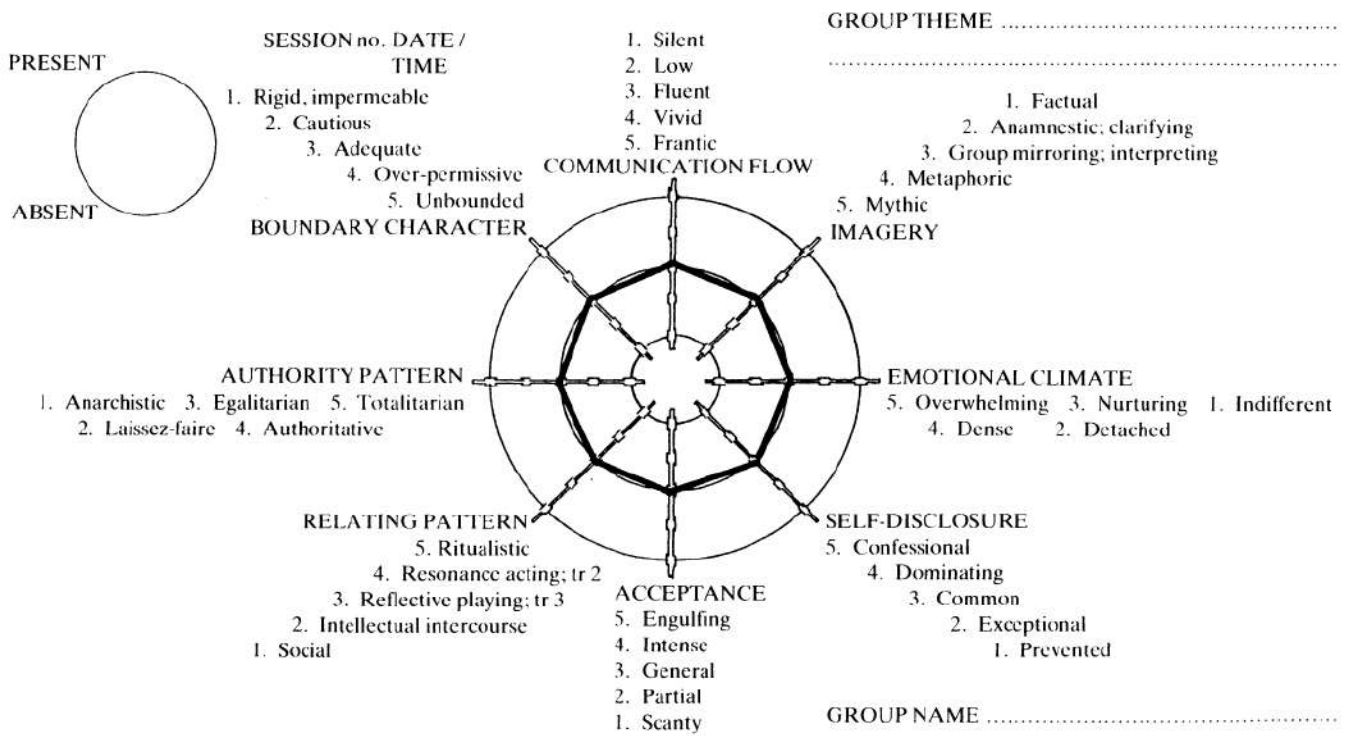


FIGURE 4 Clinical Example of the MRG in Operation



Matrix Representation Grid © G. Ahlin (1986)

FIGURE 5 Idealized MRG Figure for 'Good' Groups

observing a group in action, or an audio-tape, it is probably between fifteen minutes and an entire session; when studying a written report, probably the whole session. The time chosen is the time it takes during the group dialogue for the observer to arrive at a formulation of a group theme. Secondly, the group theme (= group-focal conflict theme) is interpreted and formulated in clear straightforward language. Thirdly, one relevant station to describe the interaction and dialogue for each determinant is selected. The stations selected are linked together by lines forming an octagonal graphic figure which represents the actual Matrix-in-operation (Figure 4). When later on in the group process the same group theme (group-focal conflict) is activated again, the comparison between the Matrix Representation Figure of that time and the previous one(s) presumably shows the change-process in the group's Matrix. The following general characteristics of the octagonal figures offer possibilities to evaluate the change.

Evaluation of MRG Figures

The idealized 'good group-analytic group' will have a Matrix figure like Figure 5. When the determinants operate like that, they produce a creative group climate, ripe with constructive gains of insight, working-through and change. But a 'good' group is barely represented and only by the no. 3 stations of the grid.

Potentially all stations in all determinants are therapeutically valuable, depending in what sequence and process they occur in relation to the group theme. 'Factual information' (Imagery determinant, station 1) can be crucial as a part of reality-testing. Any of the no. 5 stations may have to be created in reality in the group to be investigated and worked through. Indifference may have to emerge to allow members with childhood deprivation experiences to work that through. Silence may signify many things, and so on. More commonly though, a 'good group' analytic group state will be depicted in the grid somewhere within the shaded area in Figure 6.

Any extremes in one or more determinants may signify a state of arrest and/or regression in the group as a whole. Any move from extreme stations to middle ones will signify a more mature (or work-group) activity (Bion), provided the group theme is not changed into a more non-problematic one. ('Work-group activity' is used here in the sense of performing therapeutic group-analytic work.)

SESSION no. DATE / TIME

PRESENT
 ABSENT

- 1. Silent
- 2. Low
- 3. Fluent
- 4. Vivid
- 5. Frantic

- 1. Factual
- 2. Anamnestic; clarifying
- 3. Group mirroring; interpreting
- 4. Metaphoric
- 5. Mythic

COMMUNICATION FLOW

BOUNDARY CHARACTER

- 1. Rigid, impermeable
- 2. Cautious
- 3. Adequate
- 4. Over-permissive
- 5. Unbounded

IMAGERY

AUTHORITY PATTERN

- 1. Anarchistic
- 3. Egalitarian
- 5. Totalitarian
- 2. Laissez-faire
- 4. Authoritative

EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

- 5. Overwhelming
- 3. Nurturing
- 1. Indifferent
- 4. Dense
- 2. Detached

RELATING PATTERN

- 5. Ritualistic
- 4. Resonance acting; tr 2
- 3. Reflective playing; tr 3
- 2. Intellectual intercourse
- 1. Social

SELF-DISCLOSURE

- 5. Confessional
- 4. Dominating
- 3. Common
- 2. Exceptional
- 1. Prevented

ACCEPTANCE

- 5. Engulfing
- 4. Intense
- 3. General
- 2. Partial
- 1. Scanty

GROUP NAME

Matrix Representation Grid © G. Ahlin (1986)

FIGURE 6 Area for MRG Figures for 'Good' Groups

Discussion

The intention in this paper is to present the construction of the MRG. Only the application of this instrument to one group has been included here, in Figure 4. A pilot study aiming to validate the instrument is under way and will be reported at a later date. So far, the possible usefulness of the instrument can be commented upon mainly from a theoretical point of view. The MRG is a *research tool*, focusing solely on the group-as-a-whole level of abstraction. Thus: (1) its clinical value remains unknown until further clinical studies have been completed. (2) To study and describe a group *both* at the individual and group-as-a-whole levels it has to be combined with an instrument describing the individuals and the person-to-person interactions. Two good examples of the latter can be the Group Therapy Interaction Chronogram described by Cox (1978) or the use of sociograms reported by Husemann and Keller-Husemann (1984). (3) Its usefulness in supervision and training has to be tested with the two previous points in mind.

The MRG should be considered as a research tool complementary to those we already have access to concerning individuals. Whether it really deepens our understanding of the Group Matrix or not remains to be seen. Certainly, it does not exclude other approaches to the latent collective unconscious of a group-analytic group.

A picture may speak 'more than a thousand words'. A picture may also misdirect the thinking, especially when the picture has a pseudo-geometric shape that might be handled mathematically one way or another. I would resist temptations to calculate at length the area or the form of the octagonal MRG figures since the determinants and their stations overlap and depict nominal scales rather than separate arithmetic series of quantitative differences. To compare series of changes in MRG figures with the aid of a computer is probably very useful, but other types of computerized work on them give rise to similar objections as mathematical work. What we get from looking at those multi-shaped figures are sets of emblematic figures for the eye to seek support from, not to be captured and unduly carried away by.

Yet the use of the MRG may open possibilities we did not have before. Bion's basic assumption concepts have, rightly, been widely used to describe non-conscious aspects of group processes. They have also been criticized (for instance by Brown, 1979) for being too limiting and oversimplifying the plethora of group states in group-

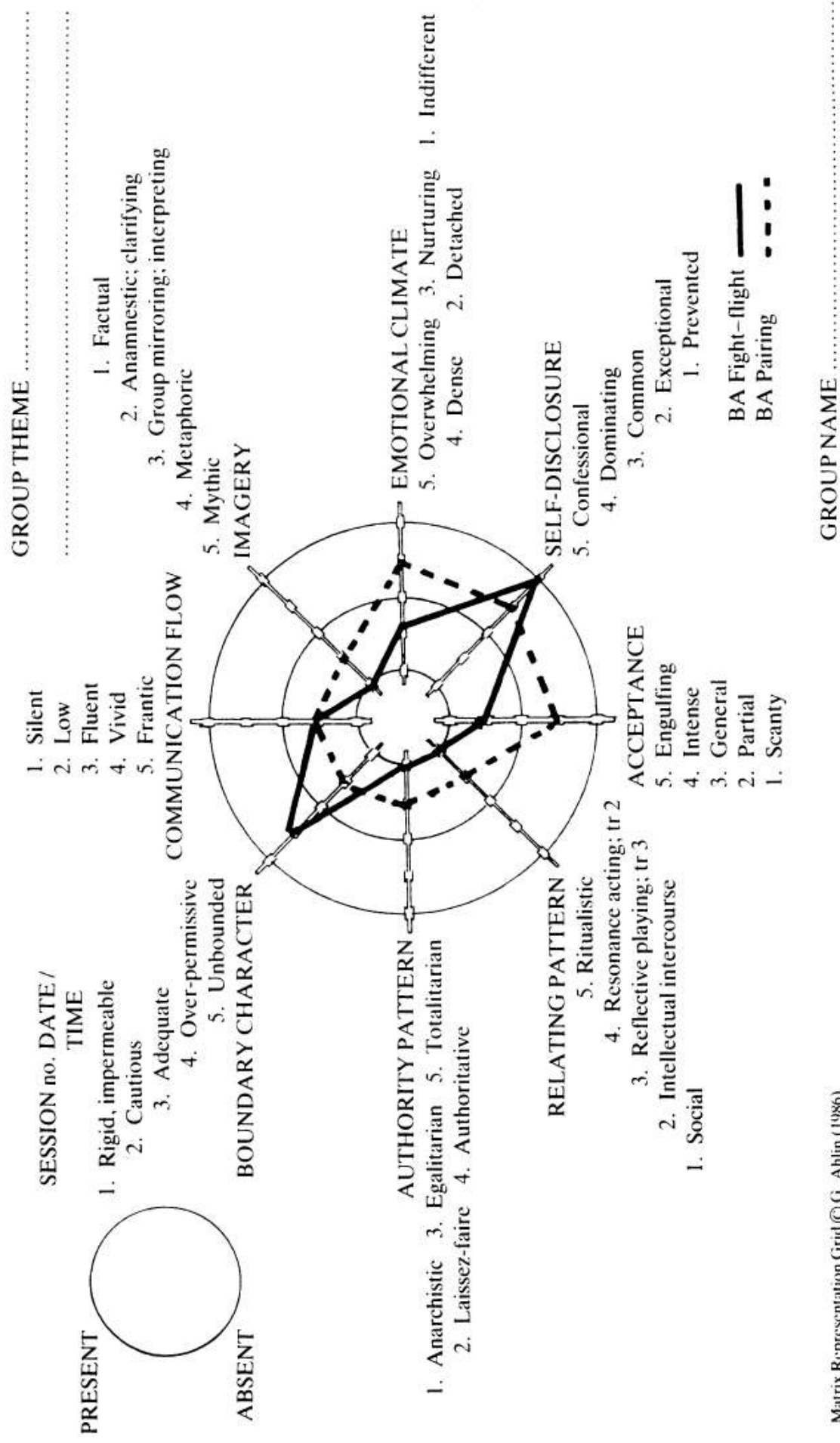


FIGURE 7 MRG Figures for Two Bion Basic Assumption States

analytic groups, and so on.

The Bion basic-assumption group states are well demonstrable in the MRG (as Figure 7 shows), but since the graphic method allows for unlimited numbers of alternate figures to be drawn, we are no longer confined to the all-too-broad character of each of the BA states, as Bion and his followers describe them, or to the restrictive number of four states in *his* scheme.

The obvious Procrustean risk when using Bion's concepts to make the group fit the concept (the reality give in to the map) can be avoided in favour of a more realistic description of what the group appears to be for the time being.

The MRG expresses the ever-fascinating and ever-complicated search for a better understanding of what is beyond the apparent surface of a 'good' and 'healthy' and 'growth-promoting' group as opposed to a 'bad' and 'destructive' one; which in turn is a matter of primary importance not only to group-analytic psychotherapists and to institutional staff in general, but to administrations, politicians, societal group-networks and nations as well. And even — in our own time, just around the corner — literally to the survival of mankind.

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