Splitting and Projective Identification in Group Dynamics

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This paper will take a focused look into another segment of a class meeting from the course “Dynamics of Organizational and Instructional Groups”. It will begin with a brief description of the group segment to become familiar with the group members and our interactions. Then a brief description of a theory about the study of groups will be described. Finally the group theory described will be used to interpret the group segment.

Description of Group Segment

The group segment described in this paper took place during the sixth meeting of fifteen total sessions. This particular segment occurred two hours into the group meeting. The class group consists of ten students, of which I am one, and the course instructor. On this particular day two students, Jess and Kartika, were not in attendance.

The segment begins with Dr. Dirkx, the course instructor, posing the question, “what sorts of things might you say about the nature of conflict, the experience of conflict in groups?” The question posed is directly related to three stories shared by Mike, Brendan and Rita about groups that experienced a difficult conflict. There is a moderate pause of about six seconds before Brendan is first to respond to the question. He succinctly states that conflict in groups is “unpleasant.” There is a short moment of laughter from the rest of the group before Terrance expands the notion of conflict as being unpleasant in groups for not only those involved directly with the conflict but also for the other group members as well. Mike then suggests that the nature of conflict in groups may be “unproductive if not handled well.” He then expands his idea by stating that in these particular situations about group conflict, the groups’ reactions halted progress of completing the tasks. Brendan then clarifies Mike’s comments by stating “Rita
didn’t say in her example that the paper was better because we fought about it. The paper just barely got done.” Rita then very concisely states that “it was a good paper” even though there was a lot of conflict in the group throughout the process of writing it. Gina then suggests that the nature of conflict in groups is “highly personal.” She states, “even though you are in a group people are trying to save face, so, and are trying to protect something. Trying to protect a grade, protect themselves, protect their ego.” Gina states that this may result in the accusing nature of conflict in groups. Mike agrees with Gina’s idea. There is a short pause and then Terrance contributes by saying that storming in a group is necessary but that he does not understand the concepts of storming and conflict to be the same. Terrance clarifies by stating that storming results in the group being productive in a task, whereas conflict does not always result in moving the group to being productive. Mary then states that in the story of the group conflict that Mike described that the conflict was actually a norm of that group. She says, “it’s not conflict going anywhere, it’s not involved in the process, it’s just the way the group runs.” Mary also suggests that in contrast, in the story Rita shared the conflict was productive in the sense that it resulted in action of the group. Dr. Dirkx then summarizes that in Rita’s story the conflict is “episodic” whereas in Mike’s story it is “a way of life.” Mike then suggests that conflict changes the “defined purpose” of the group. In the background Mary is agreeing with Mike’s assessment by expressing a few low verbal “uh huh.” Brendan agrees with Mike and refers to Terrence’s previous comment about how conflict makes the group less productive. He says, “they are expending energy towards things that really aren’t part of the group goal.” Brendan then speaks at length about the differences between how an episodic conflict may be handled in a group situation versus how conflict is handled if it is just a group norm. Dr. Dirkx then asks a question about why the group in Rita’s story did not deal with the member causing the conflict. At this
point in the conversation I attempt to make a comment, however Brendan answers instead. Terrance then states that a group, like in Rita’s story, may not deal with the conflict because “they look at how much time gets invested in the conflict as compared to, ok we’ll do, let’s just get it done.” Dr. Dirkx then interprets that to be a “cost-benefit analysis of conflict.” I then again attempt to join the conversation but Mike jumps in stating that how long a group is together determines the importance of addressing conflict. Rita at one point during Mike’s comments attempts to speak but is not able to break into the conversation. Brendan then states that how well group members know each other also is a factor in how and when conflict is addressed in a group. Dr. Dirkx asks me if I was going to say something. I reply “possibly, I don’t remember though, what it was.” Terrance ends the segment by shifting back to the discussion of storming versus conflict.

Throughout the eleven minute segment of the group interaction all of the students present contribute to the conversation except for Mehmet, me and Rita, who only makes one very small clarifying statement. Brendan, Mike and Terrance dominate the group discussion with brief statements made by Gina and Mary. Throughout the segment though there are a couple of times that the group breaks into small laughter and in the background people can be heard expressing verbal agreement with statements. This segment of group interaction demonstrates the splitting of the group into mutually beneficial subgroups through projective identification.

**Theory Description**

Splitting is a common defense mechanism used as a means to avoid anxiety. When we are faced with anxiety one of our beneath-the-surface processes is to ‘split’ the object, concept, person or group into good and bad parts. (Stapley, 2006) By separating the object causing
anxiety into good and bad parts we ease the confusion of having to see it as both, good and bad, at the same time. It is a primitive desire and simplistic way of dealing with anxiety forcing the object to be viewed as dualistic. (Stapley, 2006) “The essence of splitting is that a good impulse and object cannot be split off without leaving a bad, and vice versa.” (Stapley, 2006, p. 61)

Splitting is a defense mechanism that begins at the earliest stages of infancy and continues into adult life as a successful, yet simplistic, way of dealing with anxiety. (Stapley, 2006)

Splitting can be done in such a way that a person wanting to deny a part of the self may project it onto someone else. (Smith & Berg, 1987) “In this case we disown what we do not like by failing to see those aspects in ourselves but projecting the disowned part of ourselves onto others and therefore seeing these characteristics in others.” (Ringer, 2002, p. 133) This process is called projection. If the other person being projected upon then alters their behavior in a way that matches the projected aspects then the person doing the projecting may identify with those aspects. (Smith & Berg, 1987) This is then called projective identification. “But the self engaging in the projection now feels a strong identification with the other, because the other embodies an aspect of the self on the self’s behalf.” (Smith & Berg, 1987, p. 68) The identification with the aspects projected unto the other person allows the self to keep all aspects but with reduced anxiety. (Smith & Berg, 1987)

Splitting and projective identification may occur at the interpersonal level as well as at the group level which may result in the formation of subgroups. “One of the key consequences of splitting for collective life is that certain individuals or subgroups can come to carry particular emotions or positions on behalf of others.” (Smith & Berg, 1987, p. 70) Splitting at the group level into subgroups may be symmetrical or complementary. The symmetrical split is when subgroups compete for the same position. If the group-as-a-whole does not support each
subgroup then the subgroups may split away from the group-as-a-whole recreating the entire situation again. (Smith & Berg, 1987) The complementary split is when subgroups take on aspects that when combined sustain the group-as-a-whole. The aspects of the subgroups compliment the other subgroups and once established they heighten the differences. “For example, as the submissive becomes more passive, the dominant becomes more assertive, and vice versa.” (Smith & Berg, 1987, p.76) As this pattern develops the splitting of the whole is separated into two complimentary and mutually beneficial subgroups. (Smith & Berg, 1987)

Evidence for Interpretation

The segment of group interaction described earlier demonstrates the splitting of the group into mutually beneficial subgroups through projective identification. Based on the understanding of splitting, projective identification and the formation of subgroups it is clear that the group segment begins with splitting and subgroup formation. The first three group members to respond to Dr. Dirkx are Brendan, Terrance and Mike. The conversation then continues between just those group members for a few more statements. (Dirkx, 2012) Here we are seeing the group beginning to split into subgroups. (Smith & Berg, 1987) One subgroup consists of Brendan, Terrance and Mike who dominate the speaking in the conversation. The other subgroup consists of Rita, Gina, Mary, Mehmet and me who listen to the conversation. Although Gina and Mary both make one comment in the beginning of the segment the rest of the conversation is controlled by Brendan, Mike and Terrance. (Dirkx, 2012)

This initial observation of the group dynamics suggests each subgroup may be splitting off aspects of the group they consider bad. (Smith & Berg, 1987) For example, it could be that the dominant speaking subgroup is splitting off the passive listening aspect; and the passive
listening subgroup is splitting off the dominant speaking aspect. Both subgroups are attempting to lessen the anxiety these aspects bring to them by splitting them away from the identity of the subgroup. (Stapley, 2006) The subgroups then project these unwanted aspects onto the other subgroup. It becomes clear in the segment, after Gina and Mary have their chances to speak, that the subgroups truly begin to define their characteristics and begin to identify with each other. This is where we begin to see the splitting move to projective identification. “The disowned parts of self are projected onto another in such a way that the other begins to act toward the person doing the projecting in a manner congruent with the projection.” (Smith & Berg, 1987, p. 68)

As the segment continues the behavior of each subgroup encourages the behavior of the other. For example, as the dominant speaking subgroup continues the conversation, the passive listening subgroup is heard in the background encouraging the dominant subgroup to continue by agreeing and supporting them through verbal cues, such as “uh huh.” (Dirkx, 2012) The more the passive listening subgroup supports the other, the more the dominant speaking subgroup will continue to control the conversation. The same is true the other way as well. The more the dominant speaking subgroup continues to control the conversation, the more the passive listening group will remain quiet and supportive. (Smith & Berg, 1987) “In the complementary split, the parts take on different roles that together make a whole, as in dominance-submission, exhibitionism-spectatorship, master-apprentice.” (Smith & Berg, 1987, p. 76) The group segment demonstrates this split into complementary and mutually beneficial subgroups into the dominant and passive. Once the characteristics of each subgroup are defined and encouraged by the other it becomes difficult to break out of the pattern. For example, towards the end of the
group segment I attempt twice to jump into the conversation but am overtaken both times by members in the dominant speaking subgroup. (Dirkx, 2012)

The defense mechanisms of splitting and projective identification can be very powerful when demonstrated at the group-as-a-whole level. “Some authors emphasize the role of projective identification in groups, and view this projection/identification dynamic as the most significant influence on the development of all groups.” (Ringer, 2002, p. 138) In the segment described here splitting into subgroups and projective identification becomes mutually beneficial for the subgroups and the group-as-a-whole.
References


