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Article

group analysis

‘Should I stay or should I go?’ Group-analytic training: inhabiting the threshold of ambivalence is a matter of power, privilege and position

Alasdair Forrest and Suryia Nayak

Having in mind those gripped by ambivalence over whether to start, or stay on, the Qualifying Course in Group Analysis, we consider the training as one in ambivalence. We see ambivalence as an asset, not a hindrance. Forsaking familiar notions of ambivalence as weak and anxious, the task is to move towards a confident ambivalence. Using the ambivalent etymology of the word ‘threshold’ as an analytic lens, we use threshold not in the sense of a wooden solid boundary to be overcome, but rather as a threshing room. This article is co-written by two people different in terms of race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic background, age and experience. We argue that understanding the relationship between difference and ambivalence is crucial. This is not only because difference matters in itself. This article argues that ambivalence finds separate expressions through these differences, which act as a symbolic site. Our experience as Manchester trainees proves that threshing of the wheat from the chaff cannot happen on seemingly rigid boundaries. Rather, it happens in thresholds. In all this, examining the way ambivalence functions through power, privilege and position, we return to the ambivalent question: Do you want group analysis? And does it want you?

Key words: race, training, hospitality, ambivalence, intersectionality, thresholds

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Introduction

Ambivalence has a bad press. Ambivalence is viewed as indecisive, wishy washy, sitting on the fence: an undesirable position to be resolved. However, our interrogation of the function of ambivalence in applying for the Qualifying Course in Group Analysis argues that the development of a confident ambivalence is the task of the training. Our interrogation grapples with this question: how it is that, in the threshold of moving into the qualifying training, candidates are wracked with ambivalence? Being wracked with ambivalence is overwhelming: a state that might be interpreted as a 'not to go ahead' signal. We propose that the undecidability of ambivalence is a state that psychic defence mechanisms ward off. In other words, group analysis offers a space for the deconstruction of psychic defences that are essentially anti-ambivalent, or function to establish and maintain certainty. For example, splitting is a defensive response to ambivalence.

The idea for this article came to us in the first weekend of our qualifying course, and has been a continuing writing process since then, as we enter our third year. We knew it was important to capture the essence of our experience of ambivalence in entering and sustaining ourselves as trainees, as it is not spoken about in the literature. Furthermore, we have witnessed numerous students for whom the feeling of ambivalence has been significant in the decision not to go ahead. We argue that the relationship between ambivalence and difference offers a critical lens on how the experience of power, privilege and position is constituted, and here the implications of difference for different people has a constitutive impact on the process of deciding to enter and to remain on the qualifying course. We have come to know that it is important to speak out our intersectional differences in power, privilege and position. The tension is that, depending on the response, taking the risk of speaking out difference can have the effect of increasing ambivalence. This tells us that the relationship between ambivalence and difference is complex and ambivalence can lead to a regulatory silencing. We develop the idea that the inherent tensions of ambivalence belong to each of us in group-analytic training, but also belong to the whole community, and are best understood by inhabiting tense threshold spaces that we describe. If ambivalence is not explored as a social collective group process, it becomes lodged in individuals. Depending on prevailing discursive configurations of power, privilege and difference, some individuals become convenient symbolic sites of projective identification. Ambivalence is not a thing in and of itself, but is part of the group and part of

individuals. Ambivalence is not a problem. Ambivalence is essential. This article provides theory that would have helped us to see ambivalence as being not just an individual problem, but also one of the group as a whole. Indeed, it is in the very matrix of group analysis.

We hope that this article is helpful to those facing ambivalent feelings about whether or not to join the course, or whether or not to stay with it, and to staff with responsibility for the training.

We are both trainees on the Manchester course run by Group Analysis North (GAN), in partnership with the Institute of Group Analysis (IGA). There are characteristics of the GAN course that include structural and geographical complexities of borders, boundaries and spaces, in an intensity that is relevant to our emotional lives and our developing group-analytic identities. The structure of the GAN block course, including the spaces between the blocks, provides a model that demonstrates how things that may seem like rigid boundaries are actually tensions to be inhabited, where thought and feeling are possible. We use the complex and uncertain etymology of the word 'threshold' to illustrate how things that are seemingly boundaries are actually more like rooms; places where the work itself is done. This is analogous to Trinh Min-ha's (2011) concept of the 'boundary event', where the 'boundary' moves from being a noun to a verb—a place of doing and happenings. In this frame, the idea of 'boundary' moves from being a thing (what) to a methodology (how); here the experience of 'boundary' is a practice or method of doing.

We could think of the experience as a student, not as a training in group analysis, but as a training in ambivalence, which may be the same thing. However, wracked with ambivalence, facing the decision about whether to apply for the course, it may not be easy to see this. In starting, we did not appreciate that the task was one of holding onto the ambivalence; entering a training on ambivalence, while being unravelled by the ambivalence.

The group-analytic applicant has to tolerate being unravelled by the process, while holding onto something and not being unravelled by it. Even confirmation of a hard-won place on the course does not ease the ambivalence. This provokes questions such as: How do the IGA and its interviewers hold the tension of indeterminacy in ambivalence in their admissions processes, both for the applicants and more broadly within the membership of the Institute? How does the IGA admission panel enable the constitutive relationship between ambivalence, power, privilege and position to function as a critical lens to understand that this relationship is difference for different people?

Threshold

The surprising and uncertain etymology of the word 'threshold' is the lens through which we examine our thoughts about group-analytic training, with reference to the overwhelming ambivalence that forms part of joining any new group.

The ordinary meaning of the word 'threshold'—the piece of wood that forms the floor of a doorframe—has been used as an analogy to a boundary on several occasions in the group-analytic literature. Ahlin (2010) speaks about an intrapsychic threshold that one must overcome in order to relate in a large group. Page (1977) speaks about crossing a threshold in order to relate to others without being overwhelmed. Burman (2006), in response to Walshe (2006), develops the idea of a threshold more broadly, as a passing space whose boundary is less certain. The tendency is to perceive a threshold as something to be crossed or overcome, as if it is a solid boundary, like a physical object. However, the origin of the word itself is uncertain, and merits further thought. Indeed, the ambivalence of the etymology of the word itself fits with the exploration of our experience as trainees, which emerges throughout the article.

Liberman (2015) provides a thorough review of the competing fallacies about the origin of the word 'threshold'. Liberman's closer examination disrupts what has become the settled idea of the meaning, and in a way familiar to the psychotherapist, finds an unsettled possible truth that is stranger than the fictions.

Liberman shows that the word 'threshold' has been 'opaque as far back as the time of the oldest written monuments . . . and lack[s] a definitive etymology' (Liberman, 2015). Known forms of the word in Old English were various: *þrescold*, *þerxold*, and *þrexwold*. In one, the suffix—*wold* appears. Because *wold* means 'wood', people have assumed it referred to a piece of wood over which one stepped. However, Liberman (2015) points out, —*wold* has only ever meant wood in the sense of a forest, and not in the sense of a piece of wood. *Wold* is not a singular item; it is a habitat: a group of trees and all that lies between them, not part of one tree.

Liberman then goes further. Improbably, he tells us that the word 'threshold' most likely originally referred to a room. It literally referred to the place where grain was threshed or thrashed, which is etymologically the same word. Threshing could not have been done on a small sill (or solid boundary/physical object)—it required a large room, which historical record tells us was usually adjacent to living quarters. Oddly, then—and Liberman cannot say how—a word that once

referred to a comparatively large space of activity of great meaning came to refer to a piece of wood over which we step. That drift in the meaning of 'threshold' is so hard to understand that numerous, quite fanciful, folk etymologies have come up instead to make sense of it.

In applying to and being in group-analytic training, we can be like these folk etymologists. Rather than grappling with something that is hard to understand, we return to the familiar, providing ourselves with a simplified and incorrect explanation. The explanation arises from what we expect to see rather than from a complex, contested, uncertain threshing-out. We retreat to a defensive anti-ambivalent certainty.

As group-analytic trainees, we constantly face and consider boundaries. Can we see boundaries as complex spaces of work, spaces where things are thrashed out? Or, do we reduce the space between our different groups to reductionist borders to be overcome? We could either inhabit the 'boundary event' (Trinh, 2011) of ambivalence about starting and being in training or reduce it to no more than an offer to be accepted or rejected, or a course to be finished. In making the difficult decision to commit to the IGA Qualifying Course, and staying with it, with all the ambivalence that goes with that, the task is not to resolve the ambivalence, but rather to thrash it out again and again in the threshold.

In joining an analytic training, ambivalence meets practical concerns head on. It is a big commitment in terms of money and time, let alone everything else. The temptation could be to put down an uncontested, un-contestable boundary: a psychic threshold that is a block, over which one cannot step. The student could say that they cannot afford to step over it, for example, for financial reasons. This may be true in some senses, but it deprives one of the threshold as a threshing room: a place where there are difficult labours.

Contested space manifests itself in different ways for each person trying to work in it. We argue that ambivalence works through the intersectionality of power, privilege and position to generate different experiences of inhabiting the threshold space and of the threshing within. Because of this, we use ourselves as examples to consider this threshold, and the work to be done in it.

Threshold Spaces of Power, Privilege and Position

This article is co-written by two people who are different in terms of race, gender, sexuality, socio-economic background, age and experience.

One of us is a 55-year-old Black lesbian feminist academic and single parent, with over 35 years activist working at a grassroots level to tackle social injustice. She is funding herself on the course. The other is a 30-year-old white Scottish heterosexual man who trains as a forensic psychiatrist and medical psychotherapist, and who has been working as a doctor for just eight years. He receives two-thirds of the funding for his training from the health service. What we do have in common is our ambivalence in relation to group-analytic training. What we share is a belief that our experience, expression and task of ambivalence take different forms because of our intersectional differences in identity and context. The weighing up of costs, losses and gains of group-analytic training, membership and practice is as unequal as our unequal positions of power and privilege. In another words, ambivalence is constituted by and contingent upon intersectional difference. Importantly, we are willing to abide together in threshold spaces; here the work of unsettling our differences of power, privilege and position enables a winnowing process like separating the husk from the grain. In the threshold '[w]e're undone by each other' (Butler, 2004: 23) and accept that the unravelling task of threshing and winnowing is a life long journey. There will always be a tension in our relationship, and a pair of theoretical and praxis understandings that will never totally elide. At the end of our group-analytic training, it is likely that one of us will still be detaining people under mental health legislation, and one of us will be campaigning not to do so. However, ambivalence belongs, not just, to each of us, but to the group as a whole. Understanding the relationship between difference and ambivalence is crucial.

The complexity is that the social construction of difference finds expression through ambivalence. For example, difference configured on racism functions on ambivalence, as illustrated in Bhabha's description of 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite'* (Bhabha, 1994: 86; emphasis in original) and '"not quite/not white"' (Bhabha, 1994: 92), which captures something of the conflictual push pull within policies of racial integration, assimilation and colonialization (Treacher, 2005). Individual, group and institutional experiences of the gap between the '*almost the same, but not quite'* translate into different experiences of ambivalence contingent on power, privilege and position. The implications for trainee applicants, trainees and the IGA, including all aspects of the IGA structure, membership, admissions process, teaching curriculum and inter-intra disciplinary/professional/cultural reach, raise the following questions: Do you want

group analysis? Does it want you? Is group analysis for people, thinking and practices that foreground the intersectionality of racism? What might decolonizing group analysis look like? These are not questions with one-word answers. The answers are relational. Group analysis only exists because of the people in it. Therefore, the answers to the questions are complex regarding what kind of person is wanted, and what kind of person can want to join. These questions are pertinent because in making the very personal decision to commit to the course, it is not merely personal—it is also a decision about what makes the group, and what the group makes of itself.

Here, we are reminded of the element of ambivalence in Derrida's idea of the impossibility of hospitality (2000), which is a question of 'who is a host' and 'who is a guest'. Derrida (Derrida, 2000; Derrida and Caputo, 1997) argues that 'absolute' hospitality is characterized by an 'unconditional' welcome where 'my house is your house'. However, herein lays the 'impossibility'; if my house is your house, then who is the host and who is the guest? The guest becomes the host and the host becomes the guest–a sure recipe for ambivalence, particularly if the guest is an unreformed unrecognizable Other (Bhabha, 1994: 86). It seems that the conditions of hospitality are 'at once the boundary and a shared space' (Thiongo, 1996: 120). Demarcation of who is host and who is guest is conditional on who or what is proprietor of the territory. Entering the territory or house of the IGA Qualifying Course, the decision for an IGA trainee guest, to make an application, accept a place and progress to graduation, is a question of the conditions of hospitality required by the host. Of course, the whole process of being on the IGA Qualifying Course is a process of fulfilling conditions; the point is that these conditions have a relationship with power, privilege and position. In other words, knocking on the door of the IGA Qualifying Course is not merely an individual personal decision: it is also a decision about what makes the group, and what the group makes of itself. If group analysis is a training and practice in simultaneously inhabiting and deconstructing ambivalence, including the conditions of an 'always already' (Althusser, 1971) criteria of acceptance, this will play out differently depending on the intersectionality of power, privilege and position. In short, difference matters (Ahmed, 1998). However, difference is merely the symbolic site for the expression of ambivalence. We argue that, for too long, the focus on social construction of difference has diverted attention away from the function of difference as a vehicle or site for the psychic manoeuvrings of ambivalence. The question,

for ongoing interrogation by the IGA and those who are and wish to become members, is how do the conditions of hospitality reflect the psychic manoeuvrings of ambivalence? Can the IGA provide emotionally hospitable threshold spaces for, 'not only the thinking *of* hospitality, but thinking *as* hospitality' (Friese, 2004: 74, emphasis in original).

The capacity of the IGA to tolerate threshold spaces for 'thinking as hospitality' concerns the involvement of diverse voices, including the student voice, decolonizing the curriculum, and work of the IGA 'Power, Privilege and Position Working Group'. Framed in terms of Derrida's aporia of the impossibility of hospitality, we ask: can the IGA bear the unravelling of its proprietorship of the curriculum? Is it in the spirit of group analysis to have a group-analytic *education by the to-be-educated, including the educators*? Can the IGA stomach the deconstruction of its power, privilege and position by members of the 'Power, Privilege and Position Working Group'? Or, is the fear that '[t]his very welcoming opens up into a violence. Such violence turns the home inside out' (Westmoreland, 2008: 6)?

Group Analysis North: Manchester training and structure

The Manchester training is a block training, with sometimes more than a month between the three-day blocks. Qualifying Course students have contact with the course through supervision between blocks. The course currently takes place in a house that at times seemed to be crumbling. Despite ardent efforts by our administrator, something always seemed to be going wrong: faulty taps; leaking roofs; toilet seats that did not work; and negotiations with other occupants of the building. We were always thinking in a certain threshold: do we stay or go somewhere else? That reminds us of two things: we are left wondering if our architecture is robust enough to survive the training, or if it will crumble and not be repaired. We are also reminded of our own ambivalence. Do we stay or do we go? The block structure is complex and disorientating work, in which we move between different spaces in the large group, our therapy groups, supervision and seminars.

The boundaries between the inside and outside of therapy rooms, for example, become threshold spaces. If our attention drifts to listening to what is happening next door—or the birds nesting in the vent, or the sounds of the building's other occupants—in which group are we actually spending our time? The ideal of a perfect therapy room,

with no intruding noise, isolated from everyone else, where there is no contact between the patients whatsoever outside the group, loses something of the complexity of the 'boundary event': these boundaries that are more than boundaries–that are rooms not blocks of wood. The disturbance of the threshold as a space of winnowing can function as a catalyst for the exploration of what the disturbance means for individuals in the group and the group as a whole. In this light, the concept of boundaries as thresholds opens up the experience of boundaries as both the cause and the container of disturbance.

In our view, for all these reasons, it would be a mistake to fail to take account of the spaces between these different parts of the Manchester programme structure. What we do in the breaks becomes an enactment of something essential to the training. Breaks represent a boundary that is not hard and simple, but a contested space in which we must abide, where we could withdraw completely: never speak to a member of our small group in the kitchen, even to ask to pass the milk, or never say a word in the large group. Everything about the breaks between the sessions becomes important, and it is an odd and consistent observation that almost all of us—however long we have been there, and however many times we have followed the same pattern—need constantly to refer to the timetable to remember whether a break lasts 15 or 30 minutes. Breaks are far more like the threshing room than the simple divider: the psychic contents of each passes through them like the wind winnows through the threshing room as an essential part of the treatment of the grain. Dick (1997) reminded us that breaks are far more complex than simple withdrawal of therapy. Instead, they represent a particular kind of continuity as well as a discontinuity.

There is always the risk of treating boundaries as things in themselves, as events rather than a place of work. That would be treating the threshold as a sill rather than a threshing room, and it would be missing the active nature of the analytic training task we have set ourselves together. Before mechanisation, about a quarter of agricultural labour was threshing. In these labours of an analytic training—which cannot be mechanized—so much of our labour must be at these thresholds, both in our training and in the groups we conduct.

These thresholds are not just represented psychically: they are also represented physically. The structure of the Manchester course, and the way we therefore relate to each other, provides a 'scenic enactment'—a performative elaboration of the very tensions of ambivalence that are to be grappled with from beginning to end and beyond.

The psychosocial becomes represented in space and time, in boundaries that are necessarily complex. The boundaries quite literally, as well as figuratively, are rooms. At one level, literally, they are rooms in that we spend so much time in other spaces that are not the therapy room, whether that is in supervision, or the kitchen, or the large group. Therapy twice a week in a different building with different people may be valuable—and indeed it undoubtedly is—but we value something of the potentially ‘messier’ work of therapy in the block, where we bump into each other in the corridors, move after 15 minutes from a small group to a large group and then back into a small group, for example. We could be rigid models of abstention. But then something of the ambivalence and the tension is foreclosed.

By foreclosing the experience of that tension and ambivalence, we also could miss something of the groupishness of our task. We argue in this article that difference is the symbolic site through which our experience of ambivalence becomes manifest. But at the latent level, that wrangling with ambivalence is a common concern: a concern of interrelated individuals in singular—each of us—but also of interrelated individuals in plural—of the group (Elias, 2001 [1939]). So, when we are disorientated, not knowing to whom to speak, feeling awkward, it is not just about each of us feeling that; instead, it is an experience of a common group tension.

Experiencing ambivalence

If an ambivalent relation to the group and to each member in the group is essential to everything that is happening, this shifts it from a hindrance to the requirement to see this kernel of ambivalence in oneself. A capacity to find one’s own ambivalence, and work with it in oneself and in one’s group, is a necessary development for an analyst. Analytic work by its nature always involves heuristically placing something in foreground and other things in the background. We are always ambivalent in relation to the material in the group: we must place some things in foreground, and others in background.

A group is always ambivalent in relation to its members, and its members always ambivalent in their relationship to the group. Bion (1961) called the human a group animal at war with his groupishness. Groupishness finds its most extreme expression in basic-assumption functioning, where very destructive processes, which annihilate close relationships and which do not tolerate ambivalence, come to the fore.

Hopper (2011) provides an example of masking of ambivalence in his work on the fourth basic assumption. Here, rather than tolerating the pulls towards individuality and cohesiveness, the group oscillates between an unrelated aggregative style and an over-enmeshed (equally unrelated) massified style. Rather than more honest relationships between people, there could be surface-to-surface aggregated relationships, like billiard balls bouncing against each other, oscillating with formless unity. Or, there could be massified relationships, like mashed potato, where independence of thought and feeling is abolished. Under the lens of the threshold, aggregation is treating the space between people like a sill: a simple boundary that cannot be a place of relationship. Massification is like failing to see the threshold as a transition space and being engulfed by it. In the training, we start to track those oscillations in the minutiae of what happens in our groups, and live with them longer and longer, so as to make sense of them. Rather than joining the herd of the IGA, becoming totally integrated, or keeping apart, and not applying, we need to learn to abide in this tension.

As stated in introducing the article, ambivalence has a bad press socially. Ambivalence can be seen as a sign not to go for something or, like the NIKE advert, 'Just do it!' In contrast, the group-analytic training task, we think, is to develop a confident ambivalence. This is not an anxious, feeble state of indecision. It is not a po-faced omnipotent stance of a pretend not-knowing. Rather, it is a willingness to think in the presence of being pulled in multiple directions simultaneously in the minute-to-minute detail of each encounter.

The risk is that this 'bad press' around ambivalence becomes located in people. They then become the 'bad press' people: scapegoats. Scapegoats perform a function for the group as a whole with respect to the working-through of ambivalence. They become the indecisive ones, the ones who cannot be relied upon to make a reasonable and confident decision to train. Those people who leave the room. Those that remain, having chosen to train, could be the complaint carriers for everyone. The bad press complainers and whistle-blowers, however important their message, become a manifest site of ambivalence, where ambivalence equates with disturbance. They can generate this feeling in others: if you do not like it, leave. This response suggests a sill rather than a threshold.

In writing the article, we are struck by how easy it is for one of us to think about how ambivalence manifests itself in his working life. Does he use the group-analytic training? Is he a psychiatrist or a

psychotherapist, or can he be both or either? Does he change, as a doctor, in relation to his patients, because of group analysis? For the other, she is bound, through her lived experiences of being constituted in ambivalence, to be suspicious of ambivalence. Is this not the essence of the problem? Both of us find it hard to do anything other than retreat to our familiar, rather than unfamiliar, experiences of ambivalence. The question, 'Can we be in each other's experience of ambivalence, even if it is so different?' goes to the heart of the importance of heterogeneity in group analysis. Inhabiting the relationship between ambivalence and difference allows examination of heterogeneity from a different angle. In this frame, the threshold space of ambivalence is the thrashing of relating across difference. If the group is homogeneous the opportunity to thrash against something or someone 'Other' is limited because the vehicle for ambivalence, namely difference, is limited. Like the folk etymologists, we go back to our own stories.

It is not surprising that for a white male doctor, his story is represented through his professional identity. It is not surprising that for a Black feminist activist, her story is represented through something more personal.

Conclusions: the writing process

The process of writing this article illustrates its arguments. We knew that we wanted to write an article using our differences to bring two very different standpoints on starting the group-analytic training—and its challenges. We could not, however, do this separately, or even via emails. Indeed, the centrality of ambivalence in our argument was one that could only arise by our meeting and thrashing it out in a shared space that is a threshold. It took several meetings and it was hard work.

When we arranged to meet, there was some ambivalence expressed in our actions. Once, one of us arrived late, having made an error with arrangements. She booked the wrong flight on the wrong day. Once we did meet, it was hard to think. We were left unsure about what we were saying, or whether there was anything to say.

We came to see that the ambivalence was an asset, not a hindrance—but could only see that by sitting with it, experiencing it, and trying to make sense of it. This was an unfamiliar ambivalence. Like we aim to do in the training, which is of course on a larger scale, we were able to move from a more anxious ambivalence to a confident

ambivalence, where we could recognize and make use of those feelings, and see them as part of the process.

We normally write alone. To do something different feels unsettling. That is similar to embarking on a group-analytic training, where our thinking and practice becomes open to others, and must change or there is no education. To thresh grain there must be contact—a bashing together of things—to bring out something precious and tender. It takes time and a certain environment. It takes space.

We argue that difference in power, privilege and position functions as a symbolic site for ambivalence. This common group problem of ambivalence gets expressed at the manifest level in various ways, structured on such differences. Each person may handle their ambivalence in different ways. It is to be borne and worked with rather than ignored, or worse still allowed to fuel a paralysed disengagement from each other.

This article is primarily written for those who are right in the middle of strong ambivalent feelings towards the group-analytic training: those who do not know whether to start or to continue. However, we hope it is also of use to IGA staff delivering the training. Too much of the talk of ambivalence is about it as a symptom. Here we consider it as the valuable product.

To us (and to be fair we know no different) there seems to be something about the specificity of the Manchester training thresholds and thrashing that brings ambivalence, which allows us to inhabit it in the particular way we have in this article.

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