

Difference, whiteness and the group analytic matrix: An integrated formulation

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I am a black woman.

This statement may trigger various responses and, perhaps even the urge to disengage. Nonetheless I write it as a social fact. Firstly, to forewarn the reader that the lifeworld they are about to enter may well challenge theirs and, to correct potential erroneous, normative, racial and gendered assumptions. I trust readers will stay with any potential discomfort. Read on. And, reflect upon it at the end of the article. I am too a psychologist and aspiring group analyst. This social and professional positioning means that I have heard many conversations on 'difference' where I, and others whose bodies look like mine, have been placed under the deforming microscope of the white gaze, for the alleged edification of my peers, one of the most objectifying encounter I continue to experience. There is a long history within western epistemic, ontological and other scholarly pursuits of normalizing whiteness, of regarding those 'deviating' from it as 'different' and, of subjecting them/us to investigation, curiosity and/or exoticisation. Ultimately, to consumption. Group analysis is no exception. Difference is a historically loaded term built on the brutality of white masculinist and heteronormative social constructions and thus, on the enactment of power related violence. Central to formulating the function of 'difference' and of such brutality between individuals and groups, is the group analytic concept of the matrix. Foulkes (1973), conceptualized it as a hypothetical web of communication and relationships providing

the group a shared ground of meaning and significance. This article aims to critically examine the concept of the matrix with reference to race and specifically, to whiteness. It argues that fixating difference onto people of colour, serves fundamental functions for whiteness by linking this process to Foulkes' concept of location of disturbance. In the second part, the group matrix and whiteness are considered. Finally, using various vignettes, a formulatory framework is suggested to illustrate how whiteness may be reproduced within different levels of the group matrix.

Key words: racism, whiteness, difference, group matrix, formulation

Difference and location of disturbance

Difference is a historically heavy and charged term. The fascination and abject for difference has long been covertly, overtly and collectively expressed by people racialized as white; as illustrated, for example, by European colonialism (Hooks, 1994). The pursuit of a fantasised Other, has led to some of the greatest atrocities known to humankind, including the decimation and murder of millions of African and indigenous people and, the enslavement, displacement and exploitation of millions of others. Issues of difference are situated within this painful historical context and, must therefore be considered in conjunction with mechanisms of projection and 'Othering'.

Projection is an infantile defence mechanism that occurs when unacceptable impulses or feelings are disowned and unconsciously attributed to another entity. Projections allow the ego or the group to maintain its equilibrium by creating a false or sanitised self. As a result, the use of 'difference' to examine groups must be approached cautiously. This exercise has the potential to reproduce the white gaze and engender socially sanctioned projections onto groups deemed Other, specifically here people of colour. 'Othering' in a racial context, may be defined as the projection of shadow parts of the collective white European psyche, onto people of colour; including the former's fear of its own sexual, destructive and so called 'primitive' impulses (Fanon, 1970).

Therapeutic disciplines have indeed been charged with studying differences from the normative position of whiteness thereby, reproducing colonial schemas in ways that not only set white 'western' cultures as homogeneous, but also project deficits, anomalies and dysfunctions onto people of colour (Fernando, 2018). Such mechanisms continue to

shape the geopolitical and socio-economic order. It thus matters, who is gazed into, who is doing the gazing, and who is deemed to be 'different'. Mechanisms of 'Othering' rely on power and are reinforced by affective, structural and interpersonal devices that sustain 'them and us' divisions (Dalal, 2002). Consequently, Othering is both emergent and determinant of power relations and social configurations.

One may argue that the discursive use of 'difference' enables white groups/individuals to continue to project various disturbances onto groups and individuals racialized as black or brown, due to fears of racism (Stobo, 2005) and thus, fears of themselves (Kinouani, 2018). The group analytic concept of location of disturbance may thus be helpful to critically consider conceptualizations of difference. Foulkes (1948) considered it a key principle of group analysis and, proposed that what becomes manifest in a system may be symptomatic of a disturbance located elsewhere, in some other part/parts of the same. And, that disturbance actually located in the group as a whole or in between group members, may become observable in a particular individual/individuals. Disturbance is thus principally located between individuals or within a system as a whole and, can consequently never be wholly attributed to an individual or a single group.

Parallels may be drawn between the location of disturbance as a process and the location of difference. Difference is relational and socially constructed and similarly, not a characteristic inherently possessed by any entity. The concept of location of disturbance would suggest that 1) difference does not reside in any single social group/person; 2) that it lies in the space in between, in the communication gaps that come to be, between individuals or groups and; 3) that locating difference in people of colour, serves multiple functions not least, the disowning of unacceptable material and, it will now be argued, the reproduction of whiteness.

Defining whiteness

Green, Sonn and Matsebula (2007) conceptualize whiteness as the production and reproduction of the dominance, and privileges of people racialized as white. Others have suggested that whiteness is the cause of enduring racial inequality, injustice and power differentials between various racial groups and, the source of specific patterns of social relations within particular spatial contexts (Neely and Samura, 2011). Whiteness holds its power by the ways in which it has become woven into the fabric of 'western' (and former colonized) societies, so that all

aspects of 'our' culture, norms, and values centre and privilege white people. In the absence of disconfirming information whiteness is the assumption. It is the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and, usually found to be inferior, deficient or pathological (Dyer, 1997).

Whiteness is not consciously known to white people who generally are not socialized to see it nor to understand they are racialized beings, let alone how their being is experienced by non-white groups and individuals. This unknowing or blindness, naturally serves to keep the status-quo undisturbed. As a result, conversations on whiteness are usually fraught. They often lead to collective denial of the very existence of the structure. To anger. To silencing. And, sometimes to violence. Despite this, at times of actual or perceived threat, attempts to reassert the dominance of whiteness can be observed so that its silent (and denied) configurations can become manifest.

The contemporaneous rise in hate crimes and in neo-Nazism; the normalization of racist and xenophobic discourses in many 'western' nations constitute it has been argued, more overt attempts at protecting whiteness.

The term 'whitlash' has been coined to frame backlash from white groups, in response to changes in racial demographics or to advances in equality. Whitlash is underscored by a fear of losing power and, has been hypothesized to be central to the xenophobia filled Brexit decisions in the UK and the election of Trump and his whiteness centred nostalgic discourses in the US (Toynbee, 2016). Based on the writing of several anti-racist scholars (Frye, 1983; Kivel, 1996; Hooks, 1994, Frankenberg, 1993 and DiAngelo, 2011), we can summarise that whiteness includes (but is not limited to) the following characteristics:

- It is the foundation of white racism.
- It is socially and historically constructed.
- It is directly linked to European imperialism, colonialism, capitalism and the commodification of black and brown bodies.
- It manufactures a social hierarchy based on skin colour and proximity to itself.
- It results in the unequal distribution of power, privileges and material resources based on the same.
- It only exists in opposition to Other (non-white) categories or groups.
- It functions in a state of unconsciousness.

- It provides psychic insulation to white people leading to what has been termed white fragility, a state in which minimal racial stress or any evocation of racial phenomena become intolerable and triggers a range of psychic defences.
- It intersects with, shape and co-construct other social axes of identity such as gender and social class.

It has thus far been argued that 1) beyond referring to ethnicity or skin colour, whiteness is a complex multidimensional system designed to structure and hierarchize the social thus, the psychological and the relational; 2) that blindness to whiteness, sometimes referred to as white ignorance (Mills, 2008) is one of its central feature; 3), that whiteness is reproduced at all levels of human functioning. Consequently, it is inevitable that it will become reproduced within the group matrix.

The group matrix

The group matrix is a core tenet of group analysis. Foulkes conceptualized it as the intersubjective field within which the group operates, a ‘field effect’ which is primarily unconscious and, which interconnects all people in a network, in which they ‘meet, communicate and interact’. (Foulkes and Anthony, 2003: 26). Furthermore, Foulkes paid particular attention to the transformational and transpersonal dimensions of groups. The matrix allows the explication of this transformational process:

As soon as the group takes hold and the formally isolated individuals have felt again the compelling currents of ancient tribal feeling, it permeates them to the very core and all their subsequent interactions are inescapably embedded in this common matrix. (Foulkes and Anthony, 2003: 148)

This quote powerfully illustrates that what is located ‘outside’ the group and its members, by space or time, will find its way within the group. Jung (1970) had prior to Foulkes similarly posited the existence of a collective layer to the psyche located beyond the personal unconscious and, containing archetypal images and material of a transpersonal nature. According to Jung, this layer is not only a repository of repressed wishes and desires consisting of infantile and ego dystonic contents but also a matrix of metaphysical statements, mythology, philosophy and of all expressions of psychological life. Thus, in addition to sociological

and psychoanalytic components, Jung adds epistemology, mythology and alchemy to the matrix. Foulkes on the other hand, emphasized the shared ground, the fundamental patterns of communication and structures of human interactions.

According to Foulkes, such arrangements can be considered intrapsychically; as well as in relation to the group as an entity and, are in constant contact and interaction via two main locations: the ‘dynamic matrix’—which refers to the level/type of interactions/relationships developing in the here and now of the group and; the ‘foundation matrix’—which highlights the more fixed, shared and familiar communicational arrangements and meanings existing beyond the group. The foundation matrix seemed to have received more attention post-Foulkes and has been posited to include:

- Biology.
- Language and linguistic phenomena.
- Power relations.
- Axes of oppressions and identity including race and gender.
- Culture (in its broadest sense).
- Social values and norms.
- Intergenerational traumas/stories.
- Social structures.
- Organizations and institutions.

The social unconscious has been conceptualized as the co-constructed shared unconscious of members of a particular social system such as communities, societies, nations or cultures (Hopper, 2003). It is not always clear in Foulkes’ writing whether the social unconscious is a constituent part of the foundation matrix, or whether it sits at a different and separate level (Dalal, 2013). Nonetheless, given Foulkes’ (1973) definition of the group matrix as encompassing the total intersubjective field which is affected by communication conscious and unconscious, internal and external, past and present (Foulkes, 1973), it is perhaps more certain that the social unconscious is an integral part of the group matrix (Hopper and Weinberg, 2017).

More contemporary groups analysts now formulate the matrix as a tri-partite entity incorporating 1) the personal matrix; 2) the dynamic matrix; and 3) the foundation matrix (Nitsun, 2018; Hopper and Weinberg, 2017). The personal matrix is intended to highlight the more idiosyncratic aspects of our selves such as our psychological

traits, relational history, our object relations, Oedipal configurations and, possible interpersonal traumas. Despite this widely accepted theoretical conceptualization of the matrix, there is a continuing resistance to engage with all 'levels' of the matrix including socio-political and historical forces, in group therapy (Hopper, 2003; Stobo, 2005; Dalal, 2002). This resistance means that aspects of the psychological and relational worlds of those directly harmed by whiteness, and the re-enactment of such harm in groups is de-facto 'invisibilized' amidst discourses of difference. Whiteness it may be argued is both the cause and the effect of this 'invisibilization'.

The reproduction of whiteness in the matrix

Foulkes was amongst the first western scholars to centre the importance of the social on the psychological (Brown and Zinkin, 1994) and; to locate groups within their socio-political, economic and material contexts (Foulkes, 1973); much criticism continues to be levelled at mainstream psychotherapy models for their failure to take account of socio-political and cultural forces, their effects on psychological structures and, on relational processes. Further, purely sociological formulations of human phenomena or groups, do not commonly highlight deriving psychological or relational dynamics.

The matrix offers an important way of bridging this gap by linking considerations of the socio-political, the historical, and the structural to the psychological and vice versa. These characteristics place the matrix at a unique and crucial theoretical juncture to formulate issues of 'difference' and power. A formulation of whiteness, as a significant group analytic variable may help analysts better understand how it may become reproduced within the key interlinked levels of the matrix including, 1) at micro or individual level: within the personal matrix; 2) at interactional level: within the dynamic matrix; 3) at macro level: within the foundation matrix and finally; 4) at the historico-symbolic level within the social unconscious.

The following vignettes will be used to attempt to illustrate the same. It is accepted that alternative readings of the vignettes exist and that a myriad of interpretations are possible. However, rather than aiming to present truth claims, the purpose of the here is to encourage reflections on whiteness and power. To preserve confidentiality pseudonyms have been used throughout and details have been altered where appropriate.

Clinical reflections and formulations

Vignette 1

Sarah was a member of a homogenous slow open support group for people of colour. She was a British born woman of middle-eastern descent in her early 40s. Sarah had struggled with depression for most of her adult life, each episode was triggered by a racist encounter. Sarah felt alienated from her family and, had a stormy relationship with her parents. She refused to live up to the family's cultural expectations. Religion was an area of tension. Sarah drank alcohol and had regular extra marital sex, something frowned upon in her 'community'. During a group session where another (black) group member discussed their struggle with internalized racism Sarah became tearful for the first time in the group. She came to the realization that the anger she had experienced towards her parents came from a deep sense of shame that had troubled her most of her life. A shame she experienced because her parents were not white.

Sarah's shame for having non-white parents, we may say, demonstrates how whiteness can invade the subjectivity of people of colour. Sarah's distress took the form of a recurrent depression (arguably a gendered and culturally sanctioned way to display anger) and, her internal conflicts appeared to manifest in a troubled relationship with her parents; onto whom Sarah seemed to have located a disturbance. Half a century ago, Fanon (1970) had already observed this phenomenon which he referred to as the 'epidermalization of inferiority' or, the ways in which those racialized as Others see their internal worlds governed by the social structures of white supremacy leading to the internalization of a sense of Otherness, inferiority and self-contempt. We may interpret that assimilating normative ego-dystonic expectations lodged in the foundation matrix (and her lifelong quest for white approval) led Sarah to self-alienation and to ego splits, whereby she projected desirable aspects of herself into the white British culture/norms (the social group), the undesirable parts into her middle-eastern parents/culture (the family group), evidencing the reproduction of whiteness within her personal matrix.

Vignette 2

In the penultimate session of a study group within which I was the only black person, the contents veered towards a sense of unmanageable academic demands, something which had not particularly

troubled me. Towards the end of the session, Debbie a white woman and fellow group member, interrupted me to speak about a trip to Africa (Kenya) she had taken several decades prior. Recounting the dire poverty, 'atrocious' living/hygiene conditions, Debbie became tearful. She shared how grateful she felt for being English. Throughout Debbie's account, her gaze was firmly fixated on me. The group was silent. It had been known that I was a migrant, born and bred in a different European country. Debbie's pathos charged tears only stopped falling when I asked the group to reflect on the reasons for Africa's underdevelopment and, the ways in which we were all complicit beneficiaries.

This vignette illustrates how whiteness may be reproduced within the dynamic matrix. The concept of dormant racism proposes that much invisible racial prejudice lurks inactive or unconscious, until the conditions for its externalization are met: usually transgressions to normative expectations or, when the social order is threatened (Kinouani, 2015). Debbie might have felt challenged in her internalized sense of superiority and sought to reclaim symbolic power and authority, by reminding me of my place in the social hierarchy. There is indeed a long although often forgotten history of white women exerting domination and violence over black women often due to sexualized envy, competition or, to exert the power and control they were deprived of socially (Hooks, 1994).

As Debbie shared disparaging notions of Africanness, she 'Othered' me and, re-located my body in 'primitive' Africa. The unconscious communication possibly being, 'you do not belong here'. 'Here' could be taken to signify the group situation or indeed the country. It may be hypothesized that Debbie projected dirt onto me, a racialized and gendered notion that continues to legitimise the particular dehumanization and subjugation of black women that is located at the intersection of misogyny and anti-blackness, also referred to as misogynoir within black feminist scholarship (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). Finally, the theme of gratitude reinforces the interpretation above, since it is also a common colonial expectation placed onto poor people, people of colour and non-white migrants, which reproduces beliefs around inferiority and subordination.

Vignette 3

I was on my way home after the ending of a group session I conducted, when I witnessed from afar an altercation. A white teenager,

looking no older than 13, it seems, had been bumped into by two young black passers-by who looked somewhat older than him but appeared to be in their teens also. The white boy was begging and look unkempt. The two black teens looked well dressed. As I approached the scene heading for the entrance of the station, the white teenager screamed in the most soul piercing voice ‘fucking n*ggers’; as a response to the collision. The loud and unmitigated hatred in that young voice startled me. It took me to a place of utter terror and paralysis, for a few instants. For a minute or two, the rush hour crowd just outside the busy London station became engulfed with a heavy silence. Without any word of retort or challenge, things returned to normal after that.

In this vignette a more overt violence is evoked. That a white child could harbour such intense hate and, summon it in an instant, demands reflection. The confidence to behave in such an utterly racist manner in public, in front of a packed station; is striking. The terror I experienced also needs consideration. The matrix posits that the group or social milieu may activate more distal and collective phenomena; so that historically regressive behaviours/communications may be observed in groups. The public display of hatred/terror is evocative of master/slave configurations and may be conceptualized as an equivalence; (Hopper, 2003). Equivalences are group level (transferential) reproductions of historical configurations lodged in the social unconscious, which become observable in the here and now, when present configurations resemble that which were in the ‘there and then’ and, lead to the experiencing of corresponding affective states/attitudes and posturing posited to have been intergenerationally transmitted (Hopper, 2003).

An integrated formulation of whiteness and the group matrix

Paradoxically, schematically representing the matrix, may instantly render the very essence of its properties obtuse and reproduce the same (western) individualist and separatist orthodoxy which is the core of psychoanalysis and which, the matrix and a more radical Foulkes seek to challenge (Dalal, 2013). Figure 1 above, is nevertheless an attempt at both operationalizing and visualizing it for clinical use, using the common multi-layered frame. The different circles represent the so-called different levels of the matrix. The openings in the circles illustrate that each so-called level (the personal matrix, the

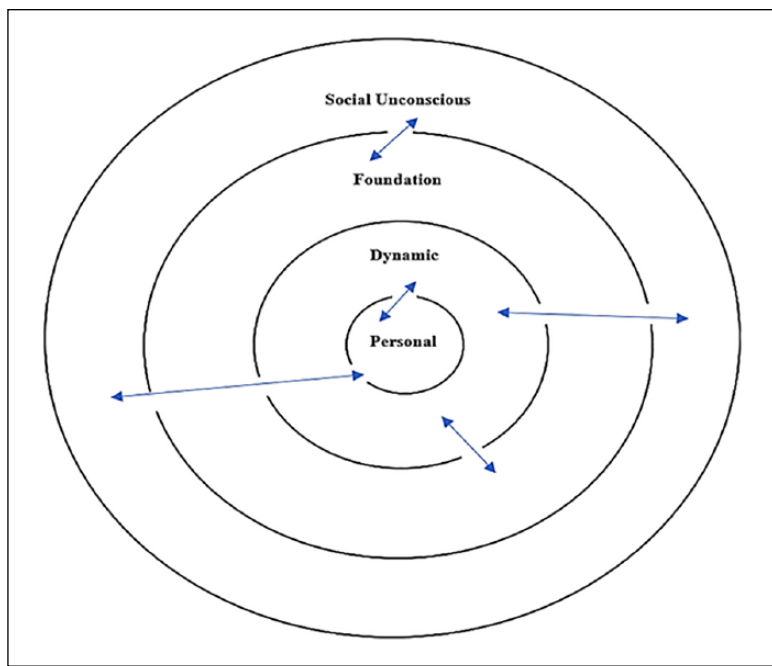


Figure 1. The author's own schematic representation of a group matrix.

group matrix, and, the social unconscious) are so porous and interpenetrable that as illustrated by the arrows; they infuse, transform and are thus co-constitutive.

In that sense, Dalal (2013) posits that the persisting idea that there exist two part to the psyche, one social and one personal and, that there can therefore be a self-contained psyche functioning in pre-existence and independently of the social, is an unsustainable perceptual illusion that allows us to concretely represent what may otherwise be too complex, if not impossible to grasp. In the same vein, Hopper and Weinberg (2017) coined the expression the 'matrix trinity' to illustrate this very point in reference to the personal matrix, the dynamic matrix and the foundation matrix. The 'three persons Christian entity' (the Father, the Son and the Holy spirit) may be envisaged as distinct yet, in substance, nature or essence, are one and the same.

Stacey (2005) also proposes that the body, the psychological, the social, histories both collective and individual are co-constitutive and, merge through silent conversations and role play; structuring

human experience and creating communicative action with meaning and significance which often evade social actors. On the one hand, these continuing dances lead to both repetition of sameness and continuity, helping the reproduction of history in the present at micro and macro levels. On the other, they have transformational potential, if responded to differently and reflexively.

Revisiting the vignettes in light of the above, we may posit that in Sarah's personal matrix, her object relations had clearly been shaped by whiteness and whiteness centred discourses located in the foundation matrix. The sense of alienation she felt in relation to her original group, was a manifestation of the sense of alienation she felt towards her non-white self. This may have come about because her internal groups were in conflict and because power relations in the foundation matrix, (themselves arguably inherited intergenerationally via the social unconscious) had been introjected.

This introjection which could equally be posited to be a function of the projections of white groups may mean that by desperately seeking to be accepted by white people, Sarah may in fact have inter-subjectively become unconsciously complicit in the reproduction of the subordination history of her cultural group and thus of whiteness. Further, the shame Sarah experiences cannot be separated from her gender. Differential expectations in relation to socially sanctioned sexual behaviour and, gendered notions of promiscuity, may be intersecting with issues of internalized racism and thus her sense of shame.

Similarly, whilst it may be posited that Debbie's 'Othering' behaviour was located in the dynamic 'here and now' of the group and, that it spoke something of either or both group members' personal matrix, it may similarly be hypothesized that perhaps, the study group and by extension the social group, was through the silence (including that of the group conductor) speaking through Debbie's mouth. In this sense one may argue, Debbie may have been holding the group's discomfort surrounding the racialized (and gendered) transgression. The author, whilst the only black member of the group, had also been known to be the most academic. One may argue the foundation matrix (via its social configurations and power relations) became or indeed is, a mirror of the dynamic matrix and, that it made visible the gendered and racialized social order.

This sense of transgression is also evoked in the final vignette, where contact with two well-dressed black teenagers triggered a racist rage in a (possibly homeless), unkempt white boy. In addition to the dynamic

of 'whitlash' evocative of the foundation matrix, the intense fear I experienced may be indicative of a momentary affective regression to a more distal and imperial 'there and then', a time when black bodies could so whimsically be put to death by white people, including white children. Imperial memories lodged in the social unconscious.

Concluding thoughts

Considerations of difference are not constructed in a vacuum and, they serve various functions. Further, whiteness signifies a set of historically, socially, politically and culturally produced and reproduced configurations that are intrinsically linked to dynamics of domination and power, located at various levels of human communication and interaction. At its most fundamental, the matrix describes the unconscious motivations, dynamics and drives that give the group its form. The different levels of the matrix cannot be considered in isolation. Indeed, those levels are illusory. Since the social is the psychological (Dalal, 2013), the personal is political (Hanish, 1970); and socio-economic configurations provide the blueprint for everyday interpersonal interactions (Fanon, 1970). All elements of the matrix form the same shared intersubjective field. Nonetheless, a multi-layered conceptualization of the matrix perhaps serves to remind us of the complexity of group phenomena and, of the need to embrace which we may struggle to fully grasp. Thus, the group analytic concept of the matrix offers a unique framework to derive meaning and, to examine mutually co-constitutive communications and dynamics at micro, meso and macro levels.


As such, it has been posited that whiteness lends itself particularly well to be examined using the prism of the group matrix and, that doing so fulfils a crucial function. Indeed:

If race is something applied only to non-white peoples, if white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people . . . The point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in and on the world. (Dyer, 1997:10)

Therefore, when white group analysts write about difference but systematically fail to locate and interrogate themselves as racialized (and gendered) beings, collective defensive and discursive mechanisms are silently in operation. Racism is reproduced. Difference and

disturbance are located onto those with less social power. To focus on whiteness is thus to examine the violence it continues to befall onto people of colour. In plain sight. Yet invisibly, to too many. It is to shift the analytic gaze which has traditionally been white (and male) therefore, it is disrupting normative assumptions. It is making space within our groups, for those whose bodies have for too long been expected to make space for others. It is trying to grasp their/our experience of the world. And, it is writing and speaking it into existence. That is indeed, shifting the balance of power. One article, one conversation and one group session at a time.

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