Group psychic retreat: adaptive defense or pathological fixation?

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Abstract

Introduction The concept of the psychic retreat is traditionally considered in psychoanalytic literature as a pathological defensive organization that hinders the development of personality and the analytic process. This paper proposes reconsidering this position in relation to group analysis. The paper hypothesizes that, following severe psychic trauma, a group psychic retreat may serve not only a defensive but also a temporary adaptive function, preserving the group's analytic potential until its capacity for the joint working through of traumatic experience is restored.

Method A theoretical analysis of John Steiner's concept of the psychic retreat and its development in group analysis is combined with an analysis of two clinical cases conducted within group-analytic psychotherapy. Using clinical material, the mechanisms of formation of the group psychic retreat, its clinical signs, the conditions for transition to chronic functioning, and the specific features of therapeutic interventions are examined.

Results Analysis of the clinical observations identified the psychodynamic mechanism of the formation of the group psychic retreat, to propose its clinical criteria, and to describe two different pathways of its emergence: as the group's reaction to an external traumatic situation and as a consequence of the spread of one participant's individual psychic retreat to the group's dynamic matrix. It is shown that, when the group's capacity to restore its analytic function is preserved, the group psychic retreat may have a transitional character and perform an adaptive role, whereas its chronicization leads to disruption of the analytic process and hinders the development of the group.

Conclusions The group psychic retreat is an independent phenomenon of group dynamics that cannot be fully reduced to the individual psychic retreats of the participants. Its clinical significance is determined not by the fact of its emergence itself, but by its function and duration. The proposed model makes it possible to consider the group psychic retreat as a dynamic process that arises under conditions of psychic overload and has different developmental variants. The practical contribution of this paper is to provide a rationale for a therapeutic strategy oriented not toward the immediate dismantling of the group's defensive organization, but toward the timely restoration of its analytic function.

Keywords: psychic retreat; group psychic retreat; group analysis; psychic trauma; dynamic matrix; analytic function of the group; symbolization; defense mechanisms.

Introduction

The concept of the psychic retreat, proposed by John Steiner, occupies an important place in contemporary psychoanalytic theory as a description of a particular defensive organization of the psyche that arises in response to unbearable affects and the threat of psychic disintegration. The psychic retreat is understood as a form of withdrawal from relationships in which a person temporarily avoids contact with external and internal reality; however, the cost of such withdrawal is a limitation of emotional development, the capacity for symbolization, and the construction of genuine relationships [1].

In group analysis, this concept has been further developed. Observations of the dynamics of analytic groups have shown that analogous processes can arise not only in individual participants, but also at the level of the group as a whole. At times, the group begins to function as a single defensive system:

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emotional involvement decreases, free associations disappear, discussion shifts to superficial topics, and painful experiences are excluded from the shared psychic space. This state has been described as a group psychic retreat.

Most authors regard the psychic retreat primarily as a pathological phenomenon that impedes the development of the analytic process. However, clinical observations suggest that this perspective is not always sufficient when working with psychic trauma. When emotional overload becomes overwhelming, direct confrontation with traumatic material may exceed the capacity of both an individual and a group to process it. In such situations, temporary withdrawal into a psychic retreat may serve not only a defensive but also an adaptive function, creating conditions that preserve the integrity of the group until it regains its capacity for further development.

This article examines the said function of the group psychic retreat. Drawing on clinical observations, it considers the hypothesis that the short-term existence of a group psychic retreat after traumatic events does not always indicate a pathological fixation of the group process. Under certain conditions, it may represent a transitional phase of group dynamics, allowing the group to preserve its capacity for the subsequent working through of traumatic experience. The paper pays particular attention to the conditions under which the defensive function of the retreat promotes the development of the group, as well as to the role of the therapist in recognizing this state, choosing the moment of intervention, and accompanying the group as it emerges from it.

Theoretical foundations of the concept of the group psychic retreat

The concept of the psychic retreat was developed by John Steiner to describe a particular form of pathological psychic organization that arises as a defense against unbearable anxiety and painful experiences. Unlike individual defense mechanisms, which help reduce psychic anxiety, the psychic retreat is a relatively stable pathological organization of the internal world that brings together a complex of defensive processes and ensures withdrawal from emotional reality and psychic development through the creation of a subjectively safe internal space.

Psychic retreat provides a sense of safety and control, but this is achieved at the cost of renouncing development, limiting the capacity for symbolization, and destroying genuine object relations. It is for this reason that Steiner regarded the psychic retreat above all as an obstacle to the analytic process: the therapeutic task consists in recognizing it and gradually overcoming it.

However, Steiner's concept was formulated in relation to individual psychoanalysis, where the main object of analysis is the relationship between patient and analyst. In group analysis, psychic life is understood differently. According to S. H. Foulkes, the group is not the sum of individual participants, but an integral system of interconnected relationships with its own dynamics [2]. Unconscious processes arise and develop not only within the personality, but also in the shared communicative space of the group — its dynamic matrix. As a result, defensive processes can also acquire a group character and become properties of the group itself rather than of its individual members [3].

This understanding allows the concept of psychic retreat to be extended to the level of group dynamics. If an individual psychic retreat is the withdrawal of the person from relations with the analyst and with reality, then a group psychic retreat may be regarded as a collective form of the group's withdrawal from relationships — with the therapist, among its participants, or with the broader social systems it belongs to. In such states, changes affect not only individual members of the group, but also the dynamic matrix itself: emotional involvement decreases, free associations disappear, communication becomes superficial, and the most painful experiences are excluded from the shared space of thinking.

M. Mojović develops Steiner's concept in this direction. While preserving the idea of the group psychic retreat as a collective defensive organization, she puts forward a fundamentally new hypothesis: under certain conditions, above all following psychic trauma, the temporary formation of such a retreat may serve an adaptive function. If the intensity of experiences exceeds the group's capacity to process them, temporary withdrawal into a psychic retreat may prevent a deeper disorganization of the group process, preserving the possibility of subsequent development [4].

This understanding changes the traditional view of the psychic retreat significantly. In this case, the key issue is not whether the psychic retreat emerges, but rather its function and duration. A short-term psychic retreat may create a temporary period necessary for restoring the group's capacity to process traumatic experience. Conversely, prolonged fixation of the group in this state leads to the loss of analytic function, chronic avoidance of emotional experience, and the transformation of the defensive mechanism into a factor that impedes development.

Thus, a fundamental theoretical question arises: should the group psychic retreat be considered exclusively a pathological phenomenon, or, under

certain conditions, it may represent a natural transitional phase in the group's recovery after trauma? This article focuses on the analysis of this question.

A model of the formation and development of the group psychic retreat

The proposed model assumes that the group psychic retreat is not an independent pathological formation, but one of the possible modes of functioning of the group's dynamic matrix when the psychic overload becomes excessive. Its emergence depends not so much on the traumatic event itself as on the relationship between the intensity of the traumatic impact and the group's capacity for the collective processing of the experiences that arise.

In the ordinary functioning of an analytic group, the participants' emotional experiences become available for shared thinking. The analytic group performs a containing function that allows holding intense affects, transforming them into mentally processed experience, and returning them to the participants in a form accessible to understanding. Free association, symbolization, and interpretation allow emotional experience to be processed collectively, ensuring the development of both individual participants and the group as a whole [5].

However, a traumatic event may temporarily exceed the group's capacity to process emotional experience. If the intensity of anxiety, fear, grief, guilt, or helplessness proves to be greater than the group's capacity to hold these experiences in the analytic space, the group's capacity for shared thinking temporarily collapses [6, 7]. In this state, the dynamic matrix ceases to perform its main analytic function [8].

In response, the group unconsciously reorganizes its defenses. Instead of jointly exploring emotional reality, the group unconsciously organizes a space that minimizes contact with the most painful experiences. Communication becomes more superficial, free associations gradually disappear, the emotional richness of discussion decreases, and the amount of intellectualization, idealization, everyday talk, or other ways of avoiding traumatic material increases. This state is what we describe as a group psychic retreat.

According to the proposed model, the further development of the process may proceed according to three different scenarios.

The first scenario occurs when the analytic capacity of the group proves sufficient for processing experiences even after a traumatic event. In this case, the temporary strengthening of defenses does not lead to the formation of a psychic retreat, and the group preserves a working dynamic matrix and gradually integrates the traumatic experience.

The second scenario involves the formation of a transitional group psychic retreat. A temporary restriction of contact with traumatic material allows the group to avoid deeper disorganization and to preserve its own integrity. As the capacity for shared thinking is restored, interpretations are made in a timely manner, and emotional communication resumes, the group gradually emerges from the retreat. In this case, the psychic retreat acts as a psychological moratorium, creating conditions for the subsequent working through of traumatic experience.

The third scenario arises when the retreat becomes a stable form of the group's existence. The defensive organization ceases to be temporary and begins to determine the functioning of the entire dynamic matrix. Avoidance of emotional reality becomes chronic, the capacity for symbolization and analytic thinking decreases, and the group itself gradually loses its therapeutic potential. Under these conditions, the psychic retreat is transformed from an adaptive defense into a pathological organization that impedes further development.

Thus, the group psychic retreat should be viewed not as a static formation, but as a dynamic process. Its clinical significance depends not only on the characteristics of the defensive organization, but above all on its function, duration, and the group's capacity to restore analytic thinking. Time, together with the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions, determines whether the psychic retreat will become a transitional stage of recovery or a chronic form of pathological functioning of the group.

The proposed model offers a new perspective on the therapist's role. The therapist's task is not to dismantle the group's defensive organization immediately, but to recognize the moment when a temporarily necessary defense begins to impede development. Consequently, therapeutic intervention is directed not so much against the existence of the psychic retreat as such, but against its chronicization.

Clinical signs of the group psychic retreat

If the group psychic retreat is regarded as an independent phenomenon of group dynamics, a practical question arises: how can the therapist recognize its formation? Our clinical observations suggest that the group's transition into a psychic retreat is accompanied not by a single symptom, but by a characteristic change in the functioning of the entire dynamic matrix. None of the signs described below is specific in itself. However, their simultaneous presence and gradual increase strongly

suggests the formation of a group psychic retreat.

The first and most noticeable sign is a decrease in the group's capacity for free association. Instead of the natural development of the associative process, discussion follows a predictable, linear pattern. Long monologues arise, already familiar themes are repeated, and the group loses its capacity to elaborate emerging material collectively.

At the same time, there is a noticeable impoverishment of the group's emotional life. Despite the presence of objectively significant or traumatic events, emotional reactions become weak, monotonous, or completely absent. The impression is that the most painful experiences cease to exist in the group's shared psychic space.

Another characteristic feature is the replacement of analytic work by the discussion of everyday, intellectual, or abstract topics. Communication continues, but its function changes. Conversation maintains contact among the participants, but ceases to fulfill the analytic task of investigating unconscious processes. This creates the illusion of productive group work, while emotionally significant material is in fact being avoided.

Another notable sign is the avoidance of traumatic material. The group may remain silent about the events that objectively determine its emotional state, or may mention them exclusively in descriptive form without exploring the feelings, fantasies, and transference reactions that arise. As a result, traumatic experience becomes isolated from the analytic process.

As the psychic retreat develops, the group's capacity for symbolization decreases. Dreams become less frequent or are discussed superficially, the number of metaphorical images and spontaneous associations decreases, and the capacity to connect external events with internal psychic reality weakens. Communication becomes predominantly concrete and descriptive.

In many cases, an increase in the idealization of the therapist, individual participants, or the group itself is observed. Such idealization is often accompanied by an experience of particular safety within the group, which excludes the need to investigate emerging tensions and conflicts. Paradoxically, an excessive sense of calm and the absence of conflicts may indicate not the maturity of the group, but the formation of a collective defensive organization.

Another feature is a change in the subjective experience of time. The group seems to stop moving forward. The same themes are repeated over many sessions without the emergence of new understanding, and the sense of development of the analytic process gradually disappears. The group enters a state of temporal stagnation, resembling the timelessness of the individual psychic retreat described by John Steiner.

Finally, a significant diagnostic sign is a change in the character of transference and countertransference. The therapist may feel a desire to abandon interpretations, maintain superficial communication, or unconsciously join in the collective avoidance of painful experiences. For this reason, awareness of one's own countertransference and regular supervision acquire particular importance when working with such groups.

These signs should be regarded not as formal diagnostic criteria, but as clinical markers. Their significance depends not on individual manifestations, but by the general organization of the group process. The more of these signs are present simultaneously in the dynamic matrix, and the more persistently they are maintained over time, the higher the likelihood that the group is functioning in the mode of a psychic retreat.

Clinical illustrations

To examine the proposed model, two clinical cases were analyzed in which the formation of a group psychic retreat was observed. Despite substantial differences in the conditions of work and the nature of the traumatic event, the analysis was conducted according to a single scheme. This approach allows the cases to be considered not as independent descriptions, but as material for comparison with the proposed theoretical model.

Each case was analyzed according to the following parameters:

- **Group context.** The features of the group that are significant for understanding the subsequent dynamics are considered: the composition of the participants, the stage of development of the group, the conditions of therapy, and the nature of relations with broader social systems.
- **Traumatic event.** The event or set of circumstances that led to a sharp increase in emotional load and to a disruption of the group's capacity for the collective processing of experiences is identified.
- **Formation of the group psychic retreat.** The sequence of changes in group dynamics that led to the emergence of a collective defensive organization is analyzed.
- **Clinical signs of the retreat.** The observed manifestations corresponding to the proposed diagnostic criteria are described: changes in the character of free associations, the emotional life of the group, symbolization,

communication, transference processes, and the relationship to traumatic material.

- **Therapeutic interventions.** The therapist's interventions aimed at recognizing the group psychic retreat, increasing awareness of the processes taking place, and restoring the analytic function of the group are considered.
- **Emergence from the group psychic retreat.** The dynamics of the restoration of the analytic process, changes in emotional communication, the return of the capacity for symbolization, and the shared understanding of traumatic experience are analyzed.
- **Outcome.** The impact of the experience on the group's subsequent development is assessed, and the observed process is evaluated to determine whether it represents a transitional or a chronic form of the group psychic retreat.

The use of a single scheme of analysis allows us to compare the two cases with each other and determine the extent to which they correspond to the proposed model of the formation and development of the group psychic retreat. Particular attention is paid not to the traumatic events themselves, but to the changes in the group's dynamic matrix that arise in response to them, as well as to the conditions that determine the transition of the defensive organization from a temporary adaptive function to a pathological fixation.

Case 1. Transitional group psychic retreat as a response to an external threat

Context

The therapy group was held in the addiction treatment ward of the Special psychiatric hospital in Kovin, Serbia. All participants were inpatients on the ward; therefore, the analytic group functioned in constant interaction with the hospital system and the life of the ward. Sessions took place twice a week, and the observation period lasted about one year, from June 2022 to September 2023.

Throughout the observation period, the group demonstrated stable analytic functioning. The participants associated freely, explored emerging feelings, and connected current events in their lives with personal history and unconscious conflicts. The group as a whole performed a containing function, allowing intense experiences to be processed.

Traumatic event

The situation changed following the admission of a new patient who actively involved other patients in destructive forms of behavior. He systematically devalued treatment, encouraged patients to discontinue therapy, and attempted to distribute drugs within the ward. Although his actions were subsequently identified by the hospital administration and he was excluded from the therapeutic community, the presence of such a threat significantly disrupted the group's sense of safety.

For the participants of the group, this situation was not merely an external event, but a factor that led to a marked increase in anxiety and destroyed the sense of protection necessary for analytic work.

Formation of the group psychic retreat

After the emergence of the threat, the group dynamics changed markedly. Whereas previously the participants had freely discussed their own experiences and connected current events with inner experience, the analytic process largely came to a halt.

Free associations gradually disappeared. Instead of exploring emotional experience, the group increasingly sank into prolonged silence or discussion of neutral everyday topics. The experiences connected with the events taking place in the ward were rarely addressed, despite their obvious significance for all participants.

Within the proposed model, these changes indicated the formation of a group psychic retreat. The group limited contact with the most painful experiences, temporarily suspending the analytic processing of traumatic experience.

Clinical signs

In the case under consideration, most of the previously described signs of the group psychic retreat were observed:

- the disappearance of free associations;
- pronounced emotional impoverishment;
- the replacement of analytic work by everyday conversations;
- avoidance of discussion of the traumatic situation;
- a temporary halt in the development of the group process.

Taken together, these changes indicated not a decrease in the activity of individual participants, but a change in the functioning of the entire dynamic matrix.

Therapeutic interventions

The turning point came when the first open statement about fear appeared. One of the participants suggested that some members of the group might be connected with the patient who was distributing drugs. This statement marked the beginning of restoration of the analytic process.

Subsequently, therapeutic interventions focused not at discussing the external circumstances as such, but at exploring the feelings that arose. Gradually,

experiences of fear, anger, helplessness, and disappointment appeared in the group. A significant part of the aggression was directed at the therapist, to whom the participants unconsciously attributed responsibility for the inability to protect the group. Through interpretations of transference processes, emotional experiences gradually became the subject of collective analytic work.

Emergence from the psychic retreat

As emotional communication was restored, the group gradually emerged from the state of psychic retreat. Free associations resumed, participants once again connected current events with their inner experience, and the group's capacity to collectively explore emerging feelings increased.

The event was no longer experienced merely as an external threat and became material for analytic work. For many participants, it enabled discovering a characteristic personal tendency to withdraw from relationships in situations of experiencing danger or mistrust.

Outcome

This case is consistent with the model of a transitional group psychic retreat. The defensive organization that emerged was temporary and did not lead to the destruction of the group's analytic function. Timely interpretation allowed the group to restore its capacity for collective processing of traumatic experience. After emerging from the psychic retreat, an increase in group cohesion, a higher level of trust, and an expanded capacity among participants to withstand intense emotional experiences without the need for collective withdrawal into a defensive formation were observed.

Case 2. Formation of a group psychic retreat under the influence of one participant's individual psychic retreat

Context

The second case concerns an analytic group which took place in private practice in Belgrade, Serbia. The observation period lasted about three years. The group was established shortly after two mass killings that occurred in Serbia in May 2023. These events had a profound impact on society as a whole and shaped the emotional context in which the group's dynamic matrix was formed.

One of the participants (hereafter — patient S.) lost a loved one during the tragedy. The other participants were not affected so directly, but they experienced the consequences of collective trauma. Thus, the group functioned within a shared context of collective trauma while its members differed in their degree of personal involvement.

Traumatic event

For patient S., the mass killing became a severe psychic trauma accompanied by the loss of a significant object. In the course of analytic work, it became evident that the experience of loss periodically gave way to a state of emotional unavailability in which there was almost no contact either with his own feelings or with the reality of what had happened.

It gradually became clear that this was not only the patient's individual psychic retreat, but also its influence on the functioning of the whole group.

Formation of the group psychic retreat

Initially, the changes were evident primarily in patient S. He avoided discussing the loss, constantly redirected the conversation to general topics, rejected any attempts to explore his own experiences, and maintained superficial communication. Over time, however, similar changes gradually emerged in the work of the whole group.

The participants returned to the traumatic material less and less often, preferring to discuss neutral topics. Instead of a shared exploration of experiences, an implicit collective agreement emerged not to approach the emotionally most painful aspects of patient S.'s experience. Gradually, the individual psychic retreat became an organizing factor of the entire dynamic matrix.

Clinical signs

During the formation of the group psychic retreat, the following signs were observed:

- avoidance of discussing traumatic experience;
- the predominance of superficial communication;
- emotional impoverishment of the group process;
- increased idealization of the therapist and the group;
- decreased capacity for symbolization;
- the gradual involvement of the other participants in the collective avoidance of painful experiences.

Particularly striking was the fact that the group itself perceived this state as calm and safe, although the analytic process had virtually stopped.

Therapeutic interventions

Awareness of the group psychic retreat developed gradually not only through the therapist's interpretations, but also through symbolic material that emerged within the group.

One of the most significant episodes was a dream that patient S. had at the beginning of therapy. In

the dream, he was swimming toward the sinking Titanic, carrying the deceased loved one on his back. Climbing aboard by ropes, he saw the therapist standing still and not helping him. Despite the warnings of those around him that the ship was sinking, the patient continued to climb, certain that he was right and the danger was exaggerated. Only once he was on deck did he realize that the ship was indeed going down.

During the subsequent discussion of the dream, the patient said that ever since he was a child he had admired the hero of the film Titanic, who died to save the woman he loved, and that he had repeatedly fantasized about a similar heroic death. This made the dual nature of his psychic retreat evident. On the one hand, it preserved an internal connection with the lost object and protected him from the unbearable pain of loss. On the other hand, it represented a self-destructive formation that sustained suicidal fantasies and impeded the experience of grief. This dream became the group's first symbolic representation of the nature of the space into which all participants were gradually being drawn.

An equally important episode occurred later. During a discussion of physical phenomena, the conversation turned to black holes. Using this topic as an opportunity to interpret what was happening in the group, the therapist asked: "I wonder whether there is a black hole in our group now?" After a short period of silence, patient S. said that he felt like a black hole in the group and that he was drawing the other group participants into his black hole.

This metaphor became a turning point in therapy. For the first time, the patient was able to realize that his individual psychic retreat had ceased to be an exclusively internal process and had become an organizing factor of group dynamics. At the same time, the group itself was able to recognize what was happening not as a set of individual difficulties, but as a collective process in which all participants unconsciously supported the existence of the group psychic retreat.

Emergence from the psychic retreat

As the group's capacity to withstand intense experiences was restored, free associations and emotional communication began to return. Instead of collective avoidance, the participants gradually began to explore experiences of loss, guilt, fear, helplessness, and grief. This allowed the group once again to perform the containing function necessary for the process of living through the loss.

Outcome

Unlike the first case, the group psychic retreat in this example proved considerably more stable. Its existence was maintained not by an external threat, but by the constant influence of one participant's individual psychic retreat on the group's dynamic matrix. At the same time, the gradual restoration of the analytic function showed that even under such conditions a group psychic retreat can be overcome, provided that the group's capacity for shared thinking is preserved and therapeutic interventions are timely.

This case demonstrates a different mechanism of formation of the group psychic retreat. While in the first observation the determining factor was an external threat, here the collective defensive organization arose as a result of the spread of an individual psychic retreat to group dynamics. These findings suggest the existence of different pathways in the formation of the same group phenomenon.

Mechanism of formation of the group psychic retreat

The clinical observations presented suggest that the formation of a group psychic retreat is a progressive psychodynamic process that arises in response to an overload of the group's analytic function.

The starting point is the emergence of a traumatic event whose intensity exceeds the group's capacity for collective processing of emotional experience. During normal group functioning, the analytic group performs a containing function: the affects that arise become the subject of free associations, symbolization, and shared understanding. This process allows the emotional experience to integrate gradually into the psychic life of the group.

After severe trauma, the intensity of experiences may prove so high that the dynamic matrix's capacity for processing them is temporarily exhausted. As a result, the group's capacity to hold emotional tension without resorting to massive collective defenses is impaired. This can be understood as a collapse of the group's analytic function.

One of the first manifestations of this process is a decrease in the capacity for symbolization, which is accompanied by disruption of the mentalization processes as well as of the transformation of affective experience into meaningful psychic representations [9]. Free associations disappear, the number of dreams, images, and metaphors decreases, and emotionally charged experiences cease to be available for collective reflection. Communication becomes predominantly concrete, descriptive, or intellectualized.

In parallel, group relationships gradually change. Instead of exploring emotional reality, the group begins to organize interactions so as to minimize contact with the most painful experiences. Collective

avoidance of traumatic material arises. The group's emotional life becomes poorer, discussion shifts to neutral topics, and various forms of psychological distance intensify.

As collective avoidance intensifies, the entire dynamic matrix is restructured. The defensive organization begins to determine the functioning of the group as a whole. One of the mechanisms stabilizing this condition is the idealization of the therapist, individual participants, or the group itself. The experience of safety is gradually sustained not by the group's capacity to process experiences, but by the absence of contact with them.

A group psychic retreat thereby emerges — a collective defensive formation that temporarily limits the group's contact with psychic reality. During this period, emotional tension decreases, but at the same time the group's capacity for development is reduced. The analytic function temporarily gives way to the defensive one.

The subsequent course of the process depends on the duration of this defensive formation and on the possibility of restoring the group's analytic function. If, as the intensity of traumatic experiences decreases and thanks to therapeutic interventions, the group regains its capacity to withstand emotional tension, free associations, symbolization, and shared thinking are restored. In this case, the group psychic retreat performs a transitional adaptive function.

If, however, the defensive organization becomes a stable mode of group functioning, avoidance gradually turns into a chronic principle of organization of the dynamic matrix. The analytic process loses its capacity for development, and the psychic retreat becomes a pathological form of the group's existence.

The proposed mechanism helps explain why the emergence of a group psychic retreat should not be considered exclusively a negative phenomenon. In itself, it is a natural defensive reaction of the group to the overload of its analytic function. The pathological feature is not the emergence of the retreat, but the impossibility of emerging from it after the group's capacity for collective processing of emotional experience has been restored.

Discussion

The clinical observations presented here offer a new perspective on the concept of the psychic retreat in relation to group analysis. Although John Steiner's concept provided the theoretical foundation of the present work, the results of the analysis suggest that, when group processes are considered, it requires further development [10].

Steiner regarded the psychic retreat as a pathological defensive organization that impedes the development of personality and the analytic process. In this model, the retreat is a space in which the patient avoids contact with psychic reality, and the main therapeutic task becomes the recognition and gradual overcoming of this defensive organization. The observations presented in this paper do not contradict this concept; however, they suggest that when applied to trauma, this interpretation is incomplete. When the psychic overload becomes extreme, a temporary restriction of contact with the most painful experiences may help preserve the group's capacity for further development.

This understanding is consistent with the basic principles of S. H. Foulkes's group analysis. If the group is considered an independent system of relationships with its own dynamic matrix, then defensive processes should be viewed not only as individual but also as group phenomena. In this case, the group psychic retreat is not a simple sum of the participants' individual defenses, but a particular state of the dynamic matrix itself, in which a collective defensive organization temporarily replaces the analytic function of the group.

The proposed interpretation also builds on M. Mojović's ideas about the possibility of the existence of a positive group psychic retreat [4, 11]. The clinical material helps clarify this concept. In our view, the crucial point is not in evaluating the retreat as positive or negative, but in analyzing its function and dynamics. For this reason, the distinction between transitional and chronic group psychic retreat appears more productive. In the first case, the defensive organization is temporary and ends with the restoration of the group's analytic function. In the second, it becomes a stable mode of functioning of the dynamic matrix, impeding further development.

The present observations are also largely consistent with contemporary understandings of psychic trauma. Recent studies of group psychotherapy for trauma also show that the initial restriction of contact with traumatic material may perform a temporary regulatory function, creating conditions for the gradual restoration of the group's capacity for collective processing of experiences [12, 13]. Most contemporary models regard initial avoidance of traumatic experience as a natural reaction of the psyche to excessive emotional overload. The therapeutic task is not to immediately dismantle the defenses, but to gradually restore the capacity of the person or group to withstand and symbolize traumatic experiences. From this point of view, the group psychic retreat

may be considered one form of collective affect regulation that arises when the analytic function of the group is temporarily lost.

The mechanism of formation of the group psychic retreat is particularly noteworthy. The cases presented suggest the existence of at least two different pathways of its emergence. In the first case, the collective defensive organization formed as a result of an external threat that exceeded the group's capacity to process emotional experience. In the second case, the determining factor was the spread of one participant's individual psychic retreat to the dynamic matrix of the whole group through the processes of transference, projective identification, and the equivalence phenomenon. Despite the difference in the initial mechanisms, both processes ended in the formation of a similar defensive organization with common clinical signs.

The practical value of the proposed model lies in the change in therapeutic strategy. If any group psychic retreat is considered exclusively a pathological phenomenon, there is a natural tendency to try to bring the group out of this state as quickly as possible. However, the observations presented suggest that premature confrontation with the collective defense may prove not only ineffective but also potentially destabilizing if the group has not yet restored its capacity to withstand intense affects. In such situations, the therapist's task is not to destroy the psychic retreat as such, but to constantly assess whether it retains an adaptive function or has already turned into a chronic form of avoidance of psychic reality.

Thus, the proposed concept does not reject the classical understanding of the psychic retreat, but extends it to group analysis and work with psychic trauma. The contemporary development of group analysis has shifted from viewing individual phenomena of group dynamics as static formations to considering them as continuous processes unfolding in the changing dynamic matrix of the group [14]. In this context, the group psychic retreat may be considered not as a fixed pathological formation, but as a process whose clinical significance depends on its function, duration, and influence on the restoration of the group's analytic function.

Conclusion

The clinical observations presented here and their theoretical analysis support the following conclusions.

First, the group psychic retreat should be considered an independent phenomenon of group dynamics that arises at the level of the group's dynamic matrix and is not reducible to a simple set of the individual defenses of its participants.

Second, the formation of a group psychic retreat is a natural reaction to a situation in which the intensity of traumatic experience temporarily exceeds the group's capacity for its collective processing. Underlying this process is a disruption of the group's analytic function, accompanied by a decrease in symbolization, collective avoidance of traumatic material, and the formation of a shared defensive organization.

Third, the group psychic retreat should not be regarded exclusively as a pathological phenomenon. In case of severe psychic trauma, it may perform a transitional adaptive function by temporarily protecting the group from deeper disorganization and preserving the possibility of subsequent restoration of the analytic process.

Fourth, the clinical significance of the group psychic retreat depends not on the fact of its emergence, but on its function, duration, and influence on the further development of the group. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to distinguish transitional and chronic group psychic retreat as two different forms of organization of group dynamics.

Fifth, the proposed model has practical significance for group psychotherapy. The therapist's task is not to immediately dismantle the collective defensive organization, but to recognize its function and choose the appropriate moment for intervention, when the group regains the capacity to withstand intense affects, symbolize experiences, and restore analytic thinking.

The proposed concept does not contradict John Steiner's classical model of the psychic retreat, but develops it in relation to group analysis and work with psychic trauma. It allows the group psychic retreat to be viewed as a dynamic process whose clinical significance depends not on the mere existence of the defensive organization, but on its role in preserving or losing the group's capacity for development.

The model presented is based on the analysis of two clinical observations and represents a theoretical generalization. Its further development requires additional clinical observations, clarification of the diagnostic criteria of the group psychic retreat, and study of the factors that determine the transition of the defensive organization from a temporary adaptive function to a chronic pathological form.

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