

(172) GROUPWORK IN GIRARDIAN STYLE

1. The pre-suppositions of this group work

1.1 Whether we know it or not, we are always in mimesis with one another. We do what we see the other doing, we desire what we see the other desiring or what we think the others desire. We are not independent, autonomous people. We are tied to and dependent on one another. Our group work is always about this. We see our mutual dependence not as a failing but as a possibility to learn from one another, a possibility to deepen our lives and to open up the future for one another.

1.2 Everything of real importance for our lives happens not in us but between us, in the space between us. This space must be open. We sit as a group in a circle around an 'empty' space, a space in which we meet each other, share our lives with one another. There should be no tables, desks or whatever there. Everything which is in our path limits or blocks what can happen between us.

1.3 In the group we give ourselves and we receive a part in each other's lives. We do this by telling each other about our life experiences, our opinions, our attitudes, our problems and our (existential) questions. We also do it far more directly with our bodies. We tell each other much more and hear from each other much more than we are aware of. Connections, of which we are very often not aware but which nevertheless effect us, are made between us, changing and deepening our lives and insights.

1.4 This can only happen in so far as we are free in the group. We are free when we do not rival with one another, when we do not try to take power, do not divide people in the group into 'good' and 'bad', do not make alliances with some members against others, are not afraid, and so on. For as long as we are in the group, freedom also means that we forget the worries that we have outside the group, in so far as they do not belong to the theme of the group, in order that we can be really present in the group. If freedom is not present, whether in the group or in one of the people, then this must be talked about. Unfreedom results in more unfreedom. It very quickly blocks the whole group.

1.5 Freedom is thus the decisive reality. It is the freedom from the mimesis of desire through which we can really accept ourselves and each other as we are. It is not automatic. Our culture, of which we are a part, does not know it. It must be given again, time after time. There are therefore two possibilities, which are certainly related to one another:

1.5.1 Freedom is given to us in the group, in the meeting with each other. We do this by accepting and trusting one another. Thus we receive part of this freedom.

1.5.2 In some way or another, we know about God, about Jesus. He is free from desire. As his reality comes into our lives, we come into mimeses with him, receiving and taking part in his freedom.

1.6 In our group work we learn with our heads and with our heart, with our whole being. It is all about finding a new place in the midst of humanity, about a new culture.

2. The goal(s) of meeting together as a group

2.1 In general, we have a fairly clear insight into the way in which others rival and make scapegoats but we are blind when it is about our own deeds and works. We have to learn to recognise the cultural mechanisms in ourselves: our rivalries, our imprisonment in scapegoat mechanisms, our dependence on ourselves, our pride and so on. All these expressions of culture, this being imprisoned by the mechanisms of culture, close out deeper insight and freedom. We must learn to go about with our characteristics in such a way as to leave them behind us.

2.2 We get insights into each other and into ourselves by trusting one another and being open with one another. We tell about ourselves and let the other tell about themselves. We let what we hear be. We give no praise and make no criticism. It is not about discussion. We listen. We let the stories, everything which the other tells us and says, into ourselves. What we hear in this way makes all sorts of connections with our own life stories, which we ourselves very often can't fully understand. Through them they change. We understand them better. Secrets, which we always protected out of fear, we now find we are able to tell. They no longer threaten our lives. If we become afraid, or feel resistances arising, then we say so and we try, as good as possible, to say what is the matter with us. Thus a process of change begins, the meaning of which will only later, or perhaps never, understand. We do know, however, that our lives have become freer and less threatened.

2.3 To be free thus means that we are less imprisoned by the mimesis of desire, that we accept ourselves and we can better accept those around us as they are. As a result, mutual trust grows and we also really change together. We no longer need to make others exactly the same as we ourselves are.

2.4 If we are free, we can also accept that we are different from one another and can be happy about the fact. Being different always makes life rich and full of variety. Through the working of the mimesis of desire, we are becoming ever more alike throughout the whole world. We know now that this does not resolve our difficulties with one another. In this group work, we can discover how different we are and how, in fact because of this difference, really human meetings are possible.

2.5 To trust one another, to be open in front of each other, to be free together is made more comfortable through an advertised theme. We can assume that the fact that the members of the group came shows that the content is significant for them. If it is a group which is meeting for the first time, we can begin by going round the group and each telling something about ourselves. In going around another time we can tell each other what attracted us to

the subject, why it is significant for us. In an established group we can begin with the second step. Our insight into our lives and our understanding of each other deepens at the same time as our insight into the theme. If it really has something to do with our lives, then all of our lives are in the issue.

2.6 The choice of a theme, and eventually the writing of a short advertisement, is, in a real sense, always a risky activity. As this is about an open invitation, those invited can always react by not coming. A more or less fixed group, in which the people all live in a more or less similar world, can write out the theme themselves either beforehand or at the meeting. The theme can also be altered again while we are talking together.

2.7 All of this is not about a 'process' which can be stipulated in advance. It is, through and in the togetherness, a personal event for all of the people in the group, even if that is more the case for some than for others. What happens there is unpredictable and always full of surprises.

3. The Group Leader

3.1 The group leader is very important for the group. No matter how the group leader leads, the group is dependent on him or her. All eyes and attention are again and again on the group leader. This has the result that everybody is strongly in mimesis with them. The manner in which the group leader is in the group therefore determines the manner in which everybody is in the group.

3.2 The group can only be Girardian if the group leader has a knowledge of mimesis and its cultural and personal consequences and if they accept the mimetic model as the starting point of thinking and being in the group. The group leader must be able to bring the insights of the model to bear on things which happen in the group, between the group members and between the members and the group leader. Furthermore, the group leader must be able to listen with a 'Girardian' ear to the stories of the people in the group and be able to clarify these with the help of the model.

3.3 The points made in 1.4 about all group members are of particular relevance to the group leader. The group leader must be free for the group. The group leader must be able to leave all worries behind him or her, whatever they are about, whether at home or elsewhere, to leave behind her or him all ambitions, including the ambition to make something good of the group, and so on. If the group leader is unable to do this, then he or she must tell the group and it may ultimately become a theme for the whole group.

3.4 It is naturally important that the group leader feels at home with the theme of the group, but the group leader does not prepare himself for the theme beforehand with the intention of thereby taking over the spiritual leadership of the group and steering the people in the group in a direction chosen by the leader. It is not the task of the group leader to know about the subject better than the other members of the group. Knowing less than some people in the group is an enrichment and a simple recognition that he or she doesn't know or understand is an important part of the learning process. The group leader is free about these things.

Everybody brings their life experience and knowledge to the shape of the theme. Everyone's life experience, including that of the group leader, is respected equally by all. Thus the group leader does not try to reach a specific goal nor to steer the group to a particular result decided in advance.

3.5 The group leader goes into the group without reservations, trusting in the people in the group. Everybody is equally accepted by the group leader. The group leader does not fantasise about the people, whether they participate well or less well, are sympathetic or less sympathetic personalities and also does not turn away innerly from anyone. More precisely, the group leader is free for the attention of everybody and for everybody. If that is not possible for the group leader, then that must be talked about in the group. In this manner we have to learn to be free, eventually repeatedly making errors. This does not take away from the fact that we, as group leaders, only allow the group members to really find their way if we are free in this manner.

3.6 To summarise the above: the group leader must be free of the mimesis of desire and its consequences for as long as the group is together – free of worries and fears elsewhere, of rivalry with the group or particular members of the group, of antipathies or sympathies for people in the group, of curiosity about the lives of group members, of worries about making mistakes (mistakes are always good if they are openly acknowledged in the whole group) and so on, and so on.

3.7 For the group leader it is difficult and not seldom impossible to be and remain free in the group. It is therefore important that the group leader has the possibility to speak through the experiences with somebody who the group leader trusts and who is (somewhat) expert in the subject, before and/or afterwards.

3.8 Above all, the group leader must above all simple be in the group, listening and observant, 'enfolding and sheltering every group member with their eyes'. In this way the members of the group can come into mimesis with the group leader and do the same. In so doing an ongoing mutual dependence remains. Ultimately, freedom can come from a person or people in the group as much as from the group leader.

3.9 The group leader must be able to allow criticism about him or herself and must not defend him or herself in order not to start rivalry. If there is criticism, the group leader must give it space, so that it can be expressed as clearly as possible. The criticism must then be talked about, during which the group leader must apologise. If it is not clear, then the group leader can only say thank you for the criticism and promise to think it over.

3.10 If something goes wrong in a group or if a meeting is unsuccessful, then the group leader must always seek the cause in him or herself; "What did I, where, do wrong?" We can only gain insight in what went wrong in the group if we begin with ourselves. If we do not do that, then we are all looking for scapegoats and we have lost our freedom.

3.11 The group leader must be trustworthy. They must be punctual. They must keep appointments and promises.

4. Setting up and working in a group

4.1 If the group has not come together because of an invitation, in which case the leader can also tell something about the way of working in the group, the group leader can briefly explain something about the way of working of the group during the welcome. In either case, it is important that he or she immediately establishes trust between the group and the group leader at the meeting.

4.2 If the people in the group do not know each other, after the welcome we go around the group telling each other who we are and where we come from. We can then go round again saying why we came to the group and what appealed to us about the group. If there seem to be people who do not know why they are there and are unsure whether they are happy to be there, then they must have the freedom to express this and, if they wish it on closer inspection, they must have the freedom to leave. By going around, there is already a certain acceptance of everybody by all the group members. Acceptance means here the acceptance of everybody's presence and the acknowledgement of their value in his or her own manner by each person in the group. This acceptance of the other is the basis of self-acceptance.

4.3 If the group is meeting for the first time, the group leader can ask for confidentiality: What is said is exclusively for the people in the group. What is said outside the group takes on another meaning and is then used in the cultural games of winners and losers, rivalling and making scapegoats.

4.4 The people in the group write themselves the agenda of the meeting(s): "Why am I here?" "What questions or problems have I brought with me?" "What do I want to know more about?" The group leader also takes part in this, bringing his or her own questions and problems together with the others. The things which are said can be briefly written up. A sequence or order can then be decided together with the group, although this can always be rearranged if the group seems to go off in another direction.

4.5 While the group is busy with the theme or with incidental questions which are raised by people in the group and which at that moment block the engagement of the group and which at that moment block the engagement of the group with the theme, the group works with the life experiences and (existential) questions of the members. Life experiences and questions are accepted and not questioned. The thoughts and words develop from this starting point. Among other things, this means:

4.5.1 No general introductions are given to the theme in advance, whether by the group leader or by 'an outsider', no matter how 'complex' the issue is. The group life is fundamentally restricted by an introduction. The people in the group necessarily come into mimesis with the introducer. They agree with them, or don't agree with them and are therefore forced to rival with the introducer.

4.5.2 No judgement will be made, in a moral or ethical sense. We can disagree among ourselves about everything, we can try to tell each other as clearly as possible what it is

about. We let everybody have his or her own personal value. This abstinence from judgement applies also to people who are not in the group and who therefore cannot defend themselves. All judgement belongs to scapegoating.

4.5.3 We never speak in general, but personally. Everything which stays general remains at a superficial level. Only if it becomes personal is a real meeting possible and the meeting deepens.

4.6 Everybody who wishes must get a chance to speak, a chance to recount and tell their story, a chance to put questions or to express fears and uncertainties. Everybody is responsible for this themselves, but the group leader must watch, together with the other members of the group, that everybody in fact gets their chance to speak.

4.7 If a story is told or a question is put, the other members of the group make no reaction nor do they seek answers. It is a question of recognition. Everybody tells their own stories, which they have been reminded of by the previous story, they ask their own questions, which in their lives always have a somewhat different form. The group leader can ask; "Who recognises this?", "Who can tell more?", In this way the scope of life broadens out and everybody can find their own way. The stories and questions stand. They are not judged or got rid of, nor praised. Everybody stays with themselves, in the deepening togetherness with the others.

5. Mechanisms in the group

5.1 All of the above seems almost like an idyll. It can in fact happen this way for a while, if everything works together and, in particular, if the group leader is free. At the same time, every group reflects our culture. Everything which occurs in culture also happens in the group: rivaling, making scapegoats of each other, gossiping about each other in the breaks, making alliances with one another against others, offering ourselves as scapegoats, opposing the group leader and so on. Beside and in the midst of the meeting with each other, telling each other in trust and listening, is also the fight with each other. Moreover, this also comes out time and again in the stories and questions, in the fears and resistances. If that were not the case, then the group work would ultimately be worthless. What happens in the group would then have nothing to do with the daily lives of the members of the group.

5.2 The group leader has a very important task in this regard. In order to come to new insights it is important that a group finishes, more or less, a first round of talking, has aired a topic to some degree. The group leader must again and again choose the right moment to take what is happening in the group or what is being told, to show it in the light of the mimetic model, in order to bring insight into events. He or she must show where rivalries are happening ("What's up between us/you?"), where scapegoats are being made (asking the scapegoat "How do you feel in the group" and asking the others "What are you trying to do with [name of the scapegoat]?") If the scapegoat mechanism has got stronger, the group leader can go and sit beside the scapegoat). He or she can also show where people are trying to escape their responsibilities (saying, for example, "I understand that you have no responsibilities here!") or where hypocrisy appears (asking "Are you really being honest?").

In this regard drawings and line diagrams, which make the events visible, are very often very illuminating. If people in the group do not want to accept the given interpretation, then this is not a loss. It is, rather, a further point of departure for a new talk. In a group, it is never a question of being in the right. It is about deepening insights. Differences of opinion do not need to be resolved. They can simply be allowed to stand.

5.3 There are all sorts of 'rules' which are there to make sure that what happens remains really personal and also that everybody remains responsible for themselves. For example:

5.3.1 Nobody in the group is ever referred to in the third person, either singly or together. We always speak directly to one another, using names and looking at each other. Also, if people who are not in the group are mentioned, we always use their name. The terms 'he' and 'she' belong to the scapegoat mechanism.

5.3.2 No questions are asked of each other without the questioner telling what the question means for his or her personal life. Only then is an answer to the question possible without rivalling with each other or starting the scapegoat mechanism.

5.3.3 We do not 'mind-read'. In other words we do not assume what another is thinking or intending without asking them, in order to be able to attack them in some manner. If somebody in the group presumes that another person is thinking or intending something, then they always ask, while always explaining why it is important for the questioner to know.

5.3.4 If a person or people in the group are distracted, they distract the whole group. Whatever is preoccupying them therefore becomes a theme for the whole group. Afterwards, the group returns to the original theme.

5.3.5 Attention is paid to words which take away from the value of what has been said. For example: 'but' ("I agree but..."), 'normal' ("I find it normal like that"), 'in general' ("In general I agree"), 'actually' and so on. A group leader can develop a good ear for these kind of words.

6. Evaluation

At the end of one or of several sittings, an evaluation can be held. Nobody is obliged to say anything. This provides the opportunity to say (for example) "I have learnt (something specific).", "I have now learnt what it means to be free with people who I did not know before.", "I found it great.", "I still am worried by the question...", "I feel more lonely than ever.", and so on. The contributions should thus be as personal as possible. Furthermore, the evaluation can also be used to ask the group leader questions: "Why did you do such and such in this way?" etc. There is no discussion about anything which is said at the evaluation. Everybody speaks for themselves and everything stands as it is. The group leader thanks the people in the group for their participation and working together. If something real happened in the group, then the group leader has also been enriched by new insights. That can be expressed.

Further results of the group's work can be left open. There need not be any conclusions reached. If desirable and possible, appointments can be made not only to meet each other again but also, for example, to try to address the theme which has been talked about more directly.

Hengelo, February 1994

Roel Kaptein