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# Cohort size and group dynamics in psychodynamic trainings

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This paper explores the effects of a major expansion in numbers on a psychodynamic training course. There is consideration of large and small group dynamics as experienced in any group, with further attention then paid to some more specific dynamics as encountered in a university-based psychodynamic training. The paper brings forward ideas about and examples of the effects of cohort size on individual students, on relationship between students, on relationships between students and staff and on relationships within the staff team. These include attention to issues of belonging, the potential for unhelpful phantasy and splitting dynamics and changed pressure around hierarchy and competitiveness. It highlights both the advantages and disadvantages of the larger cohort size and emphasises the need for reflective work so that both students and staff can mitigate the potential for negative outcomes and make good use of the opportunities provided by the more diverse group.

**Keywords:** Training; large and small groups; group and organisational dynamics; competitiveness

## Introduction

This paper has emerged out of an interest in the changes taking place in a training course for which I am the Director. This course – an MA in Psychodynamic Counselling and Psychotherapy – has grown very significantly in the last few years.

The course is located within a university, which of course brings its own particular pressures and advantages (O. F. Kernberg, 2011). All training courses require a viable number of applicants to thrive, but one crucial aspect of operating within higher education is that the impetus to recruit high numbers is driven by institutional and financial processes very far removed from clinical or psychoanalytic concerns. The need to work intensively with trainees in

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(ideally) small groups can be in serious conflict with the organisational imperative to recruit fee-paying students.

The course in question started out in 2013 relatively small, with regular numbers in the middle to high teens. The model of training evolved with this number in mind and was refined to meet the needs of this sized cohort with a suitable-sized staff team. This has changed radically since 2020 - each cohort now is routinely between 30 and 50 with the next cohort looking as if it will be bigger still. It is of course very welcome that more trainees are coming forward, as there is a huge need for well-trained and effective psychodynamic practitioners. It is also good that the course is attractive and has gained wider recognition and a solid reputation. However, there is no doubt that larger numbers bring new challenges, generating a rich mixture of gains and losses. In this paper I will attempt to chart some of these changes and consider both the benefits and the complexities of the larger numbers – both for staff and for students.

### **Models of training and the numbers of trainees**

There are a number of prevailing models of psychodynamic trainings – each with unique strengths and drawbacks. O. Kernberg (1996, 2016) has written eloquently about the potential for rigidity if clinical training becomes too narrowly focused on the passing on from one generation to the next of a dogmatic approach – and the danger of the ‘apprenticeship’ model, still prevalent in many UK psychoanalytic psychotherapy trainings. Violette has also many useful insights into the conscious and unconscious dynamics of the traditional tripartite (seminars, supervision, and training analysis) model of psychoanalytic learning. University-based trainings are in some ways better positioned to address such problems, being less likely to have as rigid an identification with a particular way of working, and having stringent externally applied and monitored standards to meet. As suggested in Langer et al (1964), in a university there is more scope for team teaching which mitigates the tendency towards overdependence on authority. However, such trainings also have their own difficulties. There is an inherent tension between the intensely subjective and qualitative nature of psychotherapy and the essentially positivist and objective approach which characterises university systems (see Wallerstein & Wallerstein, 2007). This paper is not aiming to tackle these important issues of training models, although some of the thinking here has relevance to this wider debate, but will focus on one particular feature of running a psychodynamic training within a university, the likely larger size of the cohort.

Private psychotherapy trainings can attract substantial cohorts but generally recruit relatively small numbers, and this is congruent with the prevailing teaching style typical of such organisations. There is a strong emphasis on small group teaching – as larger groups are not often recruited this is not generally questioned. In addition, in UK psychoanalytic psychotherapy

trainings the focus has historically been on intensive work with patients and the individual supervision which goes with it, which in turn means that the lecture and seminar components of the training have been relatively less important. Supervision and the training analysis are given the primary roles in developing the trainee's competence and professional development. Dyads, in the trainee's practice, in supervision and in their own personal therapy, are at the core of the training, with little attention paid to the group. In many courses, including the two I have attended as a trainee and others which I have taught on more recently, teaching tends to be conducted by experienced clinicians brought in to conduct a limited number of seminars, so there has not been an established core teaching team – or at least the latter is not as central to the trainees' experiences. Personal tutors are generally met with relatively rarely and may not be closely involved in the ongoing teaching. As a result the long-term individual supervision often becomes the most significant and most consistent feature of the training. Seminars on such trainings lean towards being theoretical or clinical discussion groups rather than more straightforward lectures/teaching events, again meaning that the seminar teaching staff are in some ways relatively less significant figures in the overall learning experience of the trainees.

There are also important differences between trainings relating to how much they consider, make room for and facilitate work on group dynamics. Group phenomena in psychoanalytic trainings have generally not been given the attention they require, which has brought many problems with it. As Violette (2013) says ... analytic training is, from start to finish, a group phenomenon that has only slowly been seen as such, and this recognition has even more slowly been viewed as a source of the myriad of problems involved in analytic training. 490. I wrote about the need for more attention to group dynamics (Kegerreis & Author, 2001) alongside the training in dyadic work as so many useful opportunities for professional and personal development are otherwise missed. In what follows, I will be using group relations and group dynamics thinking to consider some of the implications of cohort size on the relationships created for both students and staff. The focus is on understanding and illustrating the changing dynamics, rather than on the detail of how to ameliorate the difficulties experienced. There is indeed much to say about the latter including the use of reflective groups (see Kegerreis & Author, 2001) to address the tensions described in this paper and furthermore ways for staff teams to better navigate this potentially difficult territory – but these are beyond the scope of this paper.

### **Dynamics around the size of cohort in courses**

As indicated above, there are many different models of clinical training in the psychoanalytic world. Each model has advantages and disadvantages. Naturally all courses have to be financially viable to survive, and this has implications for how it is delivered which are experienced differently by

different training providers. However, one key issue affecting dynamics is the size of the cohort, and this is the focus of what follows. I will start with a brief overview of some key thinking around the psychodynamics of large and small groups, and then home in on some issues experienced in one particular course. Some of what is considered will be relevant to many other courses across different disciplines, while some may be more specific to psychodynamic trainings.

### **Small and large group dynamics**

There can be little doubt that group size has a major effect on the individual's experience and capacity for healthy functioning. Much has been written about the difference in psychological pressures in large and small groups (Weinberg 2012, Turquet, 1975; Yalom, 1980, Rioch 1971). As participants we occupy very different positions in each size of group, and experience ourselves in relation to the group in radically different ways. As Rioch says, (Rioch 1971, 169) 'Whereas in a small group each person can and often does become important to all others and distinguishable by all others, this is manifestly impossible in a large group...'. Weinberg writes (2012, 458) The individual experience can be intimidating and paralysing. Even finding one's voice in the crowd can be difficult, and for some people just expressing their thoughts in the large group is an achievement. Members may wonder, 'Do I dare disturb the universe, overcome my fears and say what I have in mind in public?'

Small groups are generally felt by members to be 'safer' as there is a greater possibility of getting to know each participant and therefore to be able to predict more readily how they will respond, reducing the risk of speaking out, or at least appearing to. Feeling important to the group carries with it a greater mutual responsibility for group functioning, which in turn can increase the potential for group cohesion and a genuine sense of belonging.

However, small groups are not always easier or more harmonious as difficult emotional dynamics can also exert uncomfortable pressures. The greater anxiety about and responsibility felt for the group's survival can bring their own tensions, and there can be a genuine fear of group collapse, leading to inhibited functioning. Furthermore, small groups are more likely to evoke the transference of family dynamics as they are closer in size to that primal group within which we grew up. This means that passions can run high, with sometimes intense rivalries between members. There can be a vivid sense of where each stands in relation to each other and to the staff member in charge, energised by deep Oedipal and sibling dynamics. Some of these will be conscious but many will be at work at an unconscious level, leading to what can feel like intractable animosities. Biddy Youell (2006) describes this vividly, referring admittedly to work in schools with small groups of children, but adult learners are by no means immune to the same issues:

The group experience resonates with family life and stirs up feelings of jealousy and rivalry. The children compete for the attention and approval of the one teacher, the parent in the transference. The internal unconscious preoccupations of the individual children come to the surface and produce a heady cocktail of passionate love and hatred. 116

Furthermore, in a small group there is nowhere to hide, which brings its own stresses for many students, and if relationships become difficult the whole experience of the course can be affected, with that experience dominating everything. Students might begin to dread coming or even drop out.

In short, if small groups have a productive and thoughtful dynamic they can have immense generative energy and supportive importance, but equally if they are full of tensions they can be actively destructive of the individual's creativity and confidence.

Large groups can easily promote more primitive mechanisms and more readily generate persecutory anxieties. As has been noted, 'in the crowd-like setting, amidst the rapid emergence of groups and anti-groups and the development of myths, the individual may feel at times that his conceptions of himself and the situation are often unsupported' (Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, 1976, 3). In a large group there is far more tension between on the one hand our own individuality and capacity for personal agency while on the other hand the need to belong and the tendency to be swept up in the emotional atmosphere. Turquet has written on the threats we experience to our identity in the large group (1975). De Board writes: '... because of its size, the group is in a constant state of flux and the individual experiences the very strong forces which emanate from all the members. In this constantly changing situation, the individual rarely, if ever, experiences a state of equilibrium as roles, with all their accompanying emotions and assumptions, are rapidly projected, and as rapidly withdrawn' (1978 78).

In large groups we can feel invisible, unable to be sure whether we have been noticed at all and unclear whether we have any responsibility for the way the group develops. The anxiety about speaking up can mean that many do not contribute. Those who are at ease with talking in large groups can very quickly take over, rendering the quieter members, whether comfortably or otherwise, taking up a more passive role, becoming more of an audience. If we do not feel important we can easily feel that we do not belong and do not need to take seriously the role we play in the group. The attachment to the group can be precarious. Alternatively, and dangerous in a different way, we can become submerged in the group and go along with its passions and emotional currents, even with enthusiasm, while not engaging at an individual level by making up our own mind about the issues at hand (as described in Le Bon, 1895)

**Small and large cohorts in training courses**

Much of what has so far been outlined relate to large and small groups engaged on any task, or has been taken from thinking evolved in the Group Relations framework. When it comes to the experiences of students on a training course these all apply, of course, but there are other specific factors which also come into play. One feature is that, while the cohort as a whole may be large, a significant proportion of the course is still conducted in smaller subgroups, in order to provide the necessary close attention to personal and professional development. Different subgroups are arranged in order to pursue different elements of the training task, and each bring different dynamics to the fore, as well as providing the student with a range of experiences of themselves as a member of a group and a diversity of group challenges in terms of participation and capacity to learn.

In what follows I will take each element in turn and reflect on the effects of group size. There are advantages and disadvantages to be considered which have different impact across a range of teaching events.

**Some advantages of being in a large cohort**

While large groups can be overwhelming for some, they also provide wider opportunities to learn from one another. In a large group there is 'ample opportunity for participants to learn from the behaviour of other group participants and/or facilitators. One may think: 'If she can do it, I may be able to do it as well'. Imitation or making these forms of behaviour one's own, can take place still within the large group or at a later occasion (Yalom & Lescz, 2005). The sheer diversity of individuals in a large cohort means that the individual trainee can take what time they need to build up their capacity to take part. Some will jump in straight away, while those who are less bold can see how they manage this, witness the fact that they can perhaps make 'mistakes' but survive them, and gradually gain the confidence to contribute more actively.

**Diversity**

In a large cohort there is likely to be a far wider range of students. Therefore, in terms of diversity large cohorts can offer greater richness across many different variables, such as age, class, race, ethnicity, experience and personality type. As Weinberg says, '... the abundance and diversity of people in the large group ensure that often individuals will encounter other individuals or even subgroups that have similar concerns' (2012 466)

**Age**

In a given year on the course I lead, students might range in age from being in their 20s to being in their 70s. This is a relatively unusual situation, putting

people together who might never mix in ordinary social settings. Such a mixing of generations brings with it great diversity in terms of life experience and outlook. The younger group may perhaps be lacking in lived experience but may have greater energy and optimism – and importantly do not have as much to unlearn or to regret. The older ones may have more stability, self-awareness and acceptance of reality but they can struggle with the painful impact of new insight after decades of understanding things differently for decades. Older students who have felt proficient and confident in a different role can feel deskilled being new to something difficult and demanding. As one recent trainee put it:

As a teacher, I readily offered information about myself and often used humour to build rapport with students, or to relieve tension. I found that if children liked me, I could get them to conform and do what I needed them to; to try to learn and not cause too much trouble. This was key to my approach and soon became second nature. . . . . As we approached the room, I felt frozen, how do I start this session? Why can't I speak? How do I connect with him without asking questions, or making him laugh? . . .

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Younger students may feel very anxious, and suffer from impostor syndrome alongside their more seasoned peers, but are less likely to be in the same position of having to jettison well-honed abilities in similar roles.

In a mixed group with a good representation from a wide range of age groups, they can find others wrestling with anxieties, tensions and challenges to their own. This can alleviate some of the sense of being unique in having these vulnerabilities, which can bring relief from some of the more personal persecutory feelings. At the same time each group can learn such a lot from one another, with the younger ones helping the older ones be more in touch with current young peoples' lives and the older ones helping the younger ones gain perspective and appreciate more deeply what has gone before.

They can both envy and admire each other – and if there is enough room for reflective work they can gain much from processing of these dynamics. Knowing about how they operate – in both directions – can be extremely valuable and powerful.

### **Differences in ethnicity**

In a small cohort, it is much more likely that anyone in a minority might find themselves the sole representative of their 'kind'. We know about the



pressure this can put on them to somehow be expected to speak on behalf of everyone who is black, Asian, mixed heritage or some other minority. As Jesse Sparks (2015) puts it: ‘My blackness was constantly and starkly contrasting with my literal, symbolic and cultural environment. In most of these settings, I was the darkest person in the room, and along with that came the burden of “blacksplaining”. For those who don’t know, blacksplaining is the act of explaining [black] history and culture, issues relevant to black people and the nuances of blackness to people who are not black’ (1).

In a larger cohort, students of colour are much more likely to find a significant number of others who are not white. This makes it easier for them to feel more closely connected within the group and in a position to support one another, if they choose to do so. They can feel more free to be more simply themselves rather than being expected to represent others, and can importantly share some of their experiences of being ‘othered’, growing up in a culture in which they often did not feel accepted or faced more serious ill-treatment on the basis of race.

The presence of several members of any ‘minority’ in a larger group is useful for all members of the cohort. It provides support and a greater sense of belonging but also provides more of a bulwark against stereotyping or scapegoating arising out of the projective dynamics at work. So as well as giving the students from other ethnic groups a richer experience, white members of the group can perceive and get to work on the ‘work of whiteness’ (Morgan, 2021) if there is significant representation from other ethnicities. They can helpfully get in touch with themselves as racialised, appreciating more fully how much their privilege and inherent power has affected their personal development – often out of conscious awareness as taken for granted. They will be helped to see more clearly the psychosocial impact on others of not being white and their role in perpetuating this. Being in a more diverse group can facilitate the interrogation of racial difference and its role in the group’s interrelatedness, and beyond this into wider understanding of their clients and others, something which is easily avoided in a small and more homogenous group.

## **Gender**

Something similar, but with a very different weighting in terms of power dynamics and ‘othering’, happens with male students on a counselling course, at least in the courses on which I have taught. In a small group there might only be one or two men, In a larger group there might be many more, again lifting the need for them to somehow represent all men, and allowing them to take up more nuanced positions in the larger group.

Wester and Vogel (2002) have written about some of the particular issues which men can face in training (n.b. they are writing about psychologists) concerning gender role confusion and psychosocial constructs involving

restricted emotionality. While gender stereotypes are being increasingly challenged, so that such generalisations are less applicable now, men still face different social expectations and need to do a somewhat different kind of work to establish themselves as therapeutic practitioners than women. They will face different responses from their clients based on their gender and need to find their own professional identity as a male therapist in a culture where historically men have been less able to express their feelings and manage their vulnerabilities.

If there are only one or two men in a cohort then this will restrict their scope and could inhibit their capacity to find their own unique way of doing this. Being in a minority will, as with race, bring its own challenges, but the more variety there is in the group of men on a larger training course, the freer each one will be to work out how to marry gender and role harmoniously.

### **Further differences**

Within any cohort there will be further areas of difference, some more visible than others. Sexuality, class, economic status, educational background are some of the most powerful elements where similarities and differences will be at work in the group dynamics and the interrelationships experienced in group interactions. Furthermore, intersectionalities will bring about far more interesting and complex interconnections. These cut across the more obvious differences of race and gender, creating possibilities for many more experiences of both harmony and tensions across the cohort. As well as belonging to several different groups within the course structure, the student will have the experience of belonging in several identity sub-groups at once. This can help each student encounter and more deeply appreciate both their own individuality and that of others.

It is often noted that some sub-groups can become persistent divisions within the larger group. When students choose with whom to sit in lectures and reflective groups they frequently sort themselves out into recognisable clusters. The white and black students often sit with others like them, the Asian and mixed heritage students sit together, the men also. What might be less visible but just as important is that the more predominant white and female students are also choosing their own 'tribe' (e.g. in terms of class, education, age, parental status) within the white group. This tendency can be usefully explored in reflective spaces and understood more fully, in a way that might not be accessible in a smaller group. It is part of the facilitator's role to point out what might be going on in the group dynamic in these terms, partly because it might not be consciously picked up by the participants, and partly because there can be a great wish to avoid recognition of the power of these psychosocial forces. (Hopson 2023)

The emphasis here is that the larger group makes it easier for us to become aware of and get to grips with the social unconscious (Hopper, 2003; Weinberg,

2007) referring to the existence and constraints of social, cultural and communication arrangements of which people are to varying degrees 'unaware'. It includes anxieties, fantasies, defenses and object relations, as well as various aspects of sociocultureconomicpolitical factors and forces, many of which are also coconstructed unconsciously by the members of particular groupings. (Weinberg 2012, 459) In smaller groups it is much easier to leave this unexplored.

### **Similarities matter as well**

As indicated, one of the major benefits of a larger cohort is that each student is more likely to find people they connect with readily, as well as having a broader spectrum of others who need to be encountered meaningfully across significant differences. This provides fertile ground for mutual learning, alongside useful moments of stumbling into and negotiating tensions. The subgroups which develop can of course in some cases deepen and solidify the separations, but they also offer mutual support, with the uniquely deep and honest friendships engendered by this kind of course. The potential for anyone to feel isolated is diminished, and as they still mix together in whole-group events, trainees still meet the wider cohort, providing opportunities to explore their personal 'tribal' tendencies. They have greater chance to experience, process and hopefully manage their projections and prejudices, and at the same time everyone is more likely to find somewhere where they feel that they 'fit'.

### **Complexities of larger cohorts**

#### ***Effect on competitiveness of cohort size***

All students on any training course will be pursuing their own individual journey of self- and professional development, but will also be encountering themselves as a member of the learning group and becoming aware of their position in it. Alongside the pleasures of solidarity, mutual recognition, comradeship and support, they inevitably experience less comfortable feelings, such as competitiveness, rivalry, envy, and jealousy. They are often highly tuned to the 'pecking order' in terms of how well they feel they are doing. Each student brings their own history of group experiences, in turn influenced by family dynamics. As I wrote elsewhere, using amalgamated and fictionalised examples as illustrations (Author, 2021):

Charlotte had always suppressed her own needs in the face of her mother's vulnerability and her brother's adolescent rebellion. As she progressed on the course she started to imagine putting herself first and allowing herself to shine, but held back, beset with fear as to whether this would be acceptable. Joel, laughed at continually by his older brother and sister, was now ambushed in the seminar group by contempt for peers who didn't understand the theory, ferociously wishing

to show ‘them’ that he knew better. Lara kept quiet most of the time, officially out of fear of ‘getting things wrong’ but secretly to keep strict control on her huge but long-denied wish to dazzle everyone with her insight.

Students often resist acknowledging these experiences, feeling perhaps that they should be above being competitive. They say, ‘I am only competing with myself – I want us all to succeed’. They may quite genuinely well wish each other well, but are also driven, perhaps unconsciously, by much earlier dynamics. They judge each other’s contributions, admire or envy some and feel impatient with or superior to others. They compete with one another as siblings, alert to the distribution of favour from the staff as ‘parents’. They pick up keenly who gets the approving nod or the ‘that’s interesting’ from the tutor. ‘(BACP 2021 p?)

Rivalries are at work in every group, but the experience of them is different, more diffuse and varied in a larger cohort. It can be much less clear to each individual where they stand in relation to the others, and belonging to several sub-groups in different modules means that one student can feel confident or even superior in one gathering while feeling overwhelmed or intimidated in another. One might shine in a clinical group while struggling in a theory seminar, or find the reflective spaces much more difficult than the more structured teaching events. The experience of oneself in relation to the others is much more diverse when each group contains a different set of individuals.

In a similar way to the working through of other differences, the spread of abilities and aptitudes across a larger cohort can mean that, even if one is not as confident and experienced as some of the students, one can usually find someone who is struggling a bit more like you are, a comrade who shares the journey with you and mitigates any sense that you are falling behind. More students are likely to speak up if they don’t understand something being taught, helping those who are embarrassed to admit their confusions. The difficulties can be shared and made less potentially humiliating, and this can be a great support for students who are more at the beginning of their professional development than others.

In a small cohort these perceived ‘rankings’ can feel very real and can appear to be fixed. In a larger cohort there can be much more fluidity and a mutual understanding of how each trainee is taking the course at their own pace. While it can be harder in the larger group for staff to identify accurately the individual struggles experienced by students, and therefore not provide as much insight and attentive help with managing them, on the other hand the larger cohort might provide less acute or persecutory self-measurement or sense of being seen to be failing, allowing the less confident students to find their feet in due course and claim their place.

### **Intergroup dynamics**

When the course on which this article is based was small, there was only one clinical seminar, one observation workshop, one reflective group. The larger cohort now requires the provision of several parallel groups to ensure enough personal attention. The overall dynamics are radically altered by this change.

Whatever the trainees experience in their group now has an external reference point. There can be strong fantasies (and phantasies) about the other group(s) – ‘how do our groups compare, are “they” getting more or less than I am,? Are they better/worse/happier/more difficult/better informed/preferred by staff?’ – and so on. As is regularly experienced in any group relations conference, once a group is part of a larger system, identifications and loyalties rapidly develop giving each sub-group its own culture and fantasies about where it fits in to the larger system. Projective mechanisms are rapidly engendered so that each group can take up a role within the overall course organisation driven by unconscious dynamics (Higgin and Bridger 1964).

Students can become exercised by any differences they pick up relating to how staff are behaving in and/or managing the groups, with anxious monitoring of any discrepancies in the degree of organisation or what is said about course requirements, placements, assignments and such like. There is great scope for splitting, with the potential for one member of staff to be idealised and another denigrated. When there was only one group there could be a more nuanced appreciation of what each tutor can offer and a more simple incentive to find the most value in their approach, without envious or anxious comparisons creating more destructive dynamics. The latter can take many different forms : for example, a group who has a more experienced member of staff as a tutor may be seen as getting a better deal, and develop a sense of grievance that feels very real but is in part fed by the fantasy of an injustice. It can go in the opposite way, of course, as they alternatively might be felt to be freer as less ‘under the eye’ of authority or placed with someone younger, less set in their ways or more energetic. The point is that their experience of their group is significantly affected by the fantasies about there being a difference.

Students are more likely to be dissatisfied and nurture grievances if they feel they are missing out on something others are getting, even if the reality is that they are getting something very valuable, even if perhaps a little different. Using a recent example, one tutor writes up relevant theories on the board as they arise in the discussion while another does not. For some students in the second group this makes them feel less looked after and helped, while others feel that this is too much like being at school and prefer to make their own notes of connections made. Each approach has its merits which would be appreciated by different students. On a more practical level, a tricky dynamic was uncovered when one group – which was slightly larger than the parallel ones and therefore needed more time for each member to present their work – realised that they had not had as much time dedicated to preparation for an assignment. They had had *sufficient* preparation, but the knowledge that the other group had had more made them anxious. In short, as soon as there is a group having a different experience to make comparisons with, their relationship with the work and the tutor is altered. Alongside conscious thoughts about these variations, more unconscious mechanisms of splitting and projection are more likely to occur (Klein 1946) encouraging exaggerations of what is both good and bad in the learning experience.

As well as the competitiveness between groups, which is a powerful and potentially difficult dynamic, there are also ways in which the groups can carry particular emotional roles for the cohort as a whole. Often there will be one group who becomes more disgruntled and vocal about their concerns, and it can be easy for staff and the other groups to see them as 'difficult' rather than to discern what they may be holding for the system as a whole. Projective mechanisms can push one group to express certain aspects of the wider course system, and if this is not understood and processed this can lead to progressively more destructive dynamics. Youell (2006) writes eloquently of how one class in a school were scapegoated by the staff and other students, developing a destructive self-image in part as a result of organisation-wide projections of negative feelings.

As Higgin and Bridger describe (1990) groups (here in a group relations conference) are able to carry different aspects of prevailing basic assumptions, with one taking on fight and the other flight, for example. In a GRC, each group is likely to take up a position in the wider dynamics, often without anyone realising what is going on until strong enactments are taking place. One group in the system Higgin and Bridger explore is described as 'taking on the guilt and aggression of the other two groups'. 219 On a course, if one group is doing all the complaining, the other group(s) can be the 'good cooperative' ones, when at a deeper level the complaining group may have more positive experiences than are articulated and the 'good' group may be suppressing their more critical feelings. Each may feel unconscious pressure to take up a position, which can interfere with the students being able to encounter and process the greater complexity of their relationship with the course.

### **Relationships with staff**

As explored above, larger groups provide ample scope for projective mechanisms, with healthy ambivalence made that bit harder to attain. In relation to staff, as the group as a whole has less experience of feeling jointly held by the whole team, individual tutors are likely to become more the focus. Small group leaders are looked to more intensely for the creation of a 'home' within the larger organisation, and are more prone to be idealised if they do this well, or to provoke more intense anxiety and opprobrium if they are less experienced or felt not to be as integrated into the staff team. The trainees' need to feel attached to a staff member and to identify with a group creates many positive dynamics, but can also lend itself to a more anxious and volatile set of relationships.

In a small course the staff are more likely to be experienced as a cohesive team, closely linked together and seen to be sharing their experiences. In a larger course the students have more fertile ground for fantasy about the dynamics between staff members. They may on the one hand long for coherent and consistent 'parenting' from the staff. However, especially if this connects to experiences of parental conflict in their own families, they can also pick up on

and focus unhelpfully on any sense of tension between staff members. This tension might of course be accurately detected, but equally it can be exaggerated – or even invented – as a result of the anxiety about the ‘adults’ capacity to collaborate. They will each come with their own sensitivities around ‘parental’ teamwork, and these will be readily projected onto the way the staff work.

Furthermore, students will have their own concerns about being an insider or an outsider, and with a larger staff team these can readily be projected onto particular members of a larger staff team.

One example to illustrate this is when a new member of staff was being helped by a more experienced tutor to manage a technological hitch during a teaching session. The staff involved felt this was an unexceptional moment of collaboration, but some students felt that the newer member of staff was being humiliated and ‘told off’ and became very defensive on her behalf, angry at what they perceived to be inadequate support for the new entrant. This itself connected to their own anxieties about this new member of staff, onto whom they projected their own sense of vulnerability facing so much that was new, and their desire for the difficulties to be eased by more support. It made the students anxious to see what they felt to be tension between the staff members and this fed into overall concerns about the health of the staff team and the course as a whole.

The real, as well as the imagined, hierarchy in the staff team will most likely be experienced differently too. In a small cohort the Course Director is familiar and known and ‘shared’ equally by all, and is usually experienced in a rounded and more or less reality-based way. All the students can feel equally ‘seen’ by the course director and, while there can of course be competitive dynamics, the director is felt to be closely involved in and aware of each student’s progress. In a large cohort, the director can be seen as (and indeed is likely to be made to be) more distant, and cannot be as clearly relied on to have each and every student in mind. As a result she can even become more of a somewhat feared ‘headmistress’ type figure, her position in authority crowding out and overlaying the more personal connection. The director may be the one ‘brought in’ when there are conflicts between students, or tensions between students and tutors, or between students and supervisors or placements, so she becomes in a literal sense a ‘higher’ authority, with all that goes with that. She is both more likely to be idealised on the one hand and to be the focus of grievances on the other, as there is less scope for her to be experienced as an ordinary human being with strengths and weaknesses.

As always, the more distance there is between students and a staff member the more room there is for fantasy/phantasy and for transference dynamics to prevail.

One major concern with these splitting tendencies in a large cohort is that it can generate a more ‘them and us’ dynamic between students and staff. Being part of a larger group the staff are experienced as further away, the relationship can feel less intimate and there is more room to feel overlooked – or for other

reasons to feel that the solidarity with other students is the major emotional dynamic. If significant things go wrong, this can create a location for hostility or a sense of grievance to develop, and one that can be harder to address, reinforced as it can be by the group identity. Myths can take hold and be hard to budge, even if the staff can show that they are based on factual misunderstandings. As can be seen in wider political life, hyper-cathected groups can generate their own perceived 'truths' as the sense of belonging overwhelms more ordinary reality testing. This analogy cannot be taken too far, but at the same time the more a student group is subject to a 'them and us' dynamic the more likely it is that something similar could occur.

It is important to note, however, that there are some advantages in these dynamics as well. A more cohesive student group, feeling itself to be somewhat separate from the staff team, can also generate a more independent spirit in the students as they rely more on one another and make a different use of their own resources, each other and the staff. They are more likely to set up study groups of their own, formal and informal, to generate useful online communications e.g. whatsapp groups and to share resources between themselves – all to good effect. This strengthening of internal cohesion, generated by having a well-connected student group which looks after each other more independently, is welcome and can have a creative and maturational function. However, it can also lead to any dissatisfactions becoming amplified, with dissenting voices ducking out of the conversation, less likely to speak up and/or be heard.

Another more readily appreciated positive side of there being more students and more staff involved in any given cohort is that the students will experience a richer variety of staff input. In a very small course they might go through the whole training with relatively few tutors playing a part. If they do not get on particularly well with one member of staff there may be little scope for ameliorating that experience with a better connection with another tutor. With a larger staff team, they will gain from hearing different views and from encountering clinicians who practise in somewhat different ways and who have had a variety of experiences. Furthermore, just as they have a better chance of making a valuable attachment to peers in the larger group, they can be more likely to find a tutor who makes them feel fully seen and known and/or who can explain things in a way they more readily understand. So while there can be a loss of feeling as individually significant to the whole group, this can be strongly mitigated by the greater chance to feel individually significant to specific people.

### **Staff experience and staff team dynamics**

In parallel with the above differences in student dynamics the staff are also affected strongly by cohort size. As the groups has grown bigger, it has become a simple and unavoidable fact that each member of staff will not know all the students individually or in as much depth. Those in one's small groups become well known and their individual journeys more fully appreciated, but there will



be others who remain relatively unfamiliar. Students on the course discussed here will have shared their personal life history, with deep emotional exploration, as part of the interview process (Author, 2020). They will understandably expect that their painful and intimate struggles will be remembered, but for a staff member who has interviewed maybe 50 candidates over much of a year may not be able to hold these in mind, or can only recollect them with difficulty. This is undoubtedly hard for the student, but is also a source of real discomfort for the staff who in the past were used to remembering the students' backgrounds and to shepherding each individual through their professional development. It can be painful to relinquish that sense of personal connectedness which was engendered in a small course group. It can feel like a personal failure not to be alert to each student's unique position. This was possible with a cohort of 15, but is simply not possible with cohorts 3 times that size in each year of a three year course. Accepting this is essential for staff emotional well-being, but it brings a loss with it, and the change is not easily digested.

It can be difficult to acknowledge that for what can be months one does not know each student's name with security, and humiliating as well as hurtful to the student when one gets these important things wrong. I, like all the other staff, have had the painful and embarrassing experience of getting particular students mixed up in my mind, or feeling momentarily insecure about a name which I actually know well. An example of another consequence of there being so many to keep in mind was my mistakenly making a generic greeting to a student when they had booked a tutorial about a particular subject of personal significance. While there is a lesson here that more focused attention needs to be given to these personal and professional responsibilities, with more time and care given to memorising names and to preparing for particular meetings, there is no doubt that there is a powerful sense of personal loss for myself and other staff, in that what used to be easy is now so much more difficult. There is a worry about the effects on morale of the real danger of students feeling less seen and known.

As course director I have been taken aback when it becomes clear to me that I am to some seen as much more intimidating than I was in the past. I have become aware that some students become more anxious about me knowing about their difficulties, as I am seen in so much more authoritative a position, with my supportive role relatively in the background. They might want a tutor to know something but not want it passed on to me, as I am experienced as being in a more disciplinary role. This has come up in situations such as students having conflicts in their placements or with their supervisors, or facing some personal struggle, and I can suddenly get a glimpse of how I appear to them. After many years of wanting (and I hope succeeding for the most part) to be seen primarily as a supportive figure who knows about them all and cares about fostering their individual development, it has been painful to accept that with such a large cohort the more obviously senior role I hold has had a distancing effect on students.

Along with this loss of some of the personal connectedness goes the different delegation dynamics in the staff team. Staff members now have to trust one another in a far more profound way, as each staff member becomes more important to their small groups and the course experience is spread and diversified in different seminars. There is more room in the staff group for phantasy/fantasy and anxiety, which can more easily lead to concern or even distrust. It has been a relatively frequent experience in recent years that a tutor hears about something concerning which has been happening with a colleague for example, inconsistent instructions given, and become concerned, only to find out in discussion that it did not happen like that. Students sometimes, either consciously or unconsciously, seek to pit one staff member against another, and it is highly disconcerting – though in another sense reassuring – to discover that some of the concerns that have developed have no basis in fact. However, in the interim the staff members have experienced something important in that critical fantasies about a colleague have been activated. What is being explored here is the strain involved in the diversification of the team and how much more easily unhelpful dynamics can be mobilised. This in turn highlights the immense importance of good communication within the staff group. Only if there are ample opportunities for the staff to discuss issues which are arising honestly and openly with one another can these dynamics be worked with and understood. This is another major piece of work which the staff team need to engage with, which itself is not easy. Time needs to be given to reflective work in the staff team, and in a busy university week this is not easy to come by, and of course it takes more than just time. It is a demanding and tricky task to find good ways to address intra-team tensions when they arise, but it is essential to do so. If not, fantasies gain traction and deeply destructive mistrust can potentially take hold.

Staff are, just like the students, always going to be competitive with one another. In a small team the need for cooperation and the sense of all being closely interdependent has a softening effect on the competitive dynamics as everyone feels so strongly identified with the course as a whole. When there is a larger team, with parallel sessions performing the same task, the rivalries can be more vividly experienced and can take on more of a life of their own. Knowing that the students are comparing their experiences and discussing them with other staff in tutorials can be exposing and uncomfortable. It can be dispiriting and difficult to get a sense that a colleague is working in a way one's own group would prefer. For older staff this can be if someone new arrives with a more contemporary or attractive presentational approach, and/or for younger staff it can be when the more experienced staff have teaching styles honed over many years and delivered very confidently. On the other hand, it can be seductive to be idealised, even if we all know that this is unreal and always at someone else's expense. As a result, if another staff member is being criticised, alongside the prevailing concern about quality there is always the danger that

a secret pleasure can also be experienced. Staff have to work diligently to process these dynamics if the team is to be effective and cohesive, so again staff connectedness is vital.

The different transference dynamics explored above between students and staff have to be absorbed, digested and where necessary addressed within the staff team if the difficulties are not to become entrenched. Staff can become identified with their own smaller groups and might be mobilised to enact intergroup rivalries without being aware of the underlying unconscious forces at work. The pressure to be an ideal 'mother' can produce an urge to take up a protective role and ignore some of the internal stresses in the group. This can lead to a wish to defend the 'family' from the course lead, university, placement provider or other outside agency, and this pressure and mostly unconscious partiality can provide scope for staff conflict.

In such an atmosphere, ordinary frustrations about practical efficiency can become more fraught and carry exaggerated emotional heft, whether these are in the realm of marking throughput, accuracy of documentation, or any inconsistencies or gaps in communication. The greater interdependence of the larger staff team for the overall running of the course means that any lapses are felt more keenly and can be responded to more judgmentally, as the sense of being woven together into a coherent whole is harder to maintain. This can work in all directions – from junior staff towards the course lead and from the course lead to junior staff and between colleagues.

Knowing that the students are finely tuned to any detected differences between the sub-group experiences can lead to a more 'top-down' dynamic in which staff are expected to conform to shared standards rather than having more freedom to do things in their own individual way. There is a beneficial side to this, as we can learn so much from one another, but it can also feel restrictive and diminish creativity if there is a sense that absolute uniformity is required. Each tutor might feel as if they have an established way of working which works well for them – it can be difficult to change this to adopt a more consistent approach, and in many ways this is not desirable. However, with students comparing and contrasting it is more challenging to operate more individually and there is a need for confident handling to absorb any unease created by this in the student cohort.

## **Bureaucracy**

There is, as with any organisation experiencing growth, an increasing need for more bureaucracy (Blau, 1970) as the cohorts expand and the course structure becomes more complex. Bureaucracy has been extensively explored in the sociological literature, highlighting the split between 'rational' and 'natural' systems (Scott & Davis, 2007). Weber saw it as an 'iron cage' that was needed for efficiency, but it is also experienced as enabling and containing as well as necessary (1968). Katz and Kahn (1978), p. 222) express it to be 'an instrument

of great effectiveness; it offers great economies over unorganised effort; it achieves great unity and compliance. We must face up to its deficiencies, however. These include great waste of human potential for innovation and creativity and great psychological cost to the members. As Adler writes 'formalization and standardization are means by which management ensures control over recalcitrant and unreliable labor (1993). These features of bureaucracy replace reliance on the worker's tacit knowledge and goodwill, and in doing so they undermine both (Clawson 1980). 253

This brief overview stresses the twin faces of bureaucracy in a course like the one under discussion. If there are areas of tension or even dispute, having clear documentation and relevant processes written down can be highly containing, but at the same time there is a loss of that informal connectivity which used to perform crucial functions. As the course gets bigger there has had to be 'shift from conversation to codification' (reviewer of this paper) as person to personal communication cannot be relied upon to the same extent, now has to be even more carefully placed in handbooks, module outlines and published protocols. In each of the recent years with larger cohorts we have had to update and refurbish the formal course regulations, as the wider student body brings into focus gaps which had not emerged before. Expectations which were in the past largely enforced through class discussions and tutorial processes and everybody knowing without effort what everyone else was doing, now have to be made into rule which are codified to ensure clarity and consistency.

This undoubtedly encourages staff to iron out any vagueness or ambiguity in course requirements and reduces scope for actual or perceived personal biases. But it still can evoke a sense of loss, as with any community which has to fall back on rules and regulations in place of a less formal way of internal management.

This is true perhaps for all courses across many disciplines. There is nothing unique about psychodynamic trainings in relation to most of what has been discussed. What might be different in such courses, however, is that these dynamics are themselves directly up for exploration and discussion, as they are the embodiments of concepts and processes which are at the heart of the psychodynamic endeavour. Grappling with them is not only necessary and useful in order to improve the functioning of the course itself, but can become another vital source of insight for the trainees as they prepare for clinical work and mature as practitioners. Alongside the undeniable fact that the relationships experienced in the training will deeply affect their professional journey, the understanding of these dynamics can be a crucial part of their personal and professional development.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown, larger cohorts affect the dynamics within courses in a variety of ways, some advantageous and some challenging. Staff who are adjusting from

smaller groups to bigger ones are perhaps the most alert to and potentially troubled by these dynamics as they are represent a change, but the dynamics themselves will be affecting the students even if they are not in a position to make comparisons. Relationships between students, relationships between students and staff, and relationship between staff members are all going to reverberate with the conscious and unconscious impact and implications of the larger numbers.

Reflective groups are essential for processing some of these dynamics, as they can provide students with the opportunity and support needed to interrogate some of their responses and to understand more about what is being projected into whom and why. Similarly, the need for close and honest communication between staff member is absolutely paramount – to mitigate the scope for splitting and to nurture deeper trust. The larger the cohort, the more work there is to do on ensuring effective functioning.

While large and small cohorts make different demands on all concerned, as well as generating different rewards, excellent training experiences can be provided whatever the number of students. But this has to be facilitated by focused awareness of the powerful dynamics engendered in the overall system with its altered teaching relationships.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Notes on contributor

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