

If Group Process feels like the Unwelcome Guest

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Abstract

Starting with some reflections on the author's personal Hakomi training experience, the article aims to frame the role that an engaged participation to group process in a prolonged Hakomi training might play in the development of the interpersonal qualities of a Hakomi therapist. Group process is described as a laboratory where the Hakomi Principles and the Hakomi Therapist's Loving Presence – with its ingredients of authenticity, safety, warmth, and compassionate understanding – can be experimented and applied to the felt experience of being together in a group.

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase “each other” doesn't make any sense.
The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you. Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want. Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open.
Don't go back to sleep.”*

Gialal al-Din Rumi, 13th Cen.

During my Hakomi training, having a 2-hour group process was perceived by many as the arrival of the "unwelcome guest." A guest who shows up at your door uninvited, invades your routine and affects your cozy habits for dealing with your life. When the "unwelcome guest" knocks at our door, many people put their authentic self on hold. They try to comply with the situation as best as they can, relying on the fact that the unwelcome guest will go away in one hour or one day. This knowledge becomes the light at the end of the tunnel.

Oddly enough, sometimes the same unwelcome guest may reveal themselves as an unexpected and enjoyable adventure, pulling you out of your comfort zone and bringing you gifts whose existence you would have ignored until they came to you.

In my perception, my training group struggled to reach that stance of openness towards the new, which would have allowed us to see the inherent beauty and the possibility for growth through the "unwelcome guest."

What happened to us? How did we perceive Group Process?

Many people – who were more solution-oriented – showed a marked preference for learning Hakomi skills, as opposite to dedicating time to deepen the interpersonal dimension of the training group itself. They wanted to get over the group process to go back to what was more critical to them. Others expected from the trainers that as a “good mother”, they could mind guess our internal states, name them, take care of them and resolve them, making - as Bion would say - the “unthinkable” of the group thinkable. Some of us would start feeling tense or uncomfortable at the sole idea of Group Process happening.

Therefore, there were several recurring issues within our group, spoken overtly only rarely. Those underlying issues ultimately had the power to escalate and generate tension in the environment, in the culture of our group life and the group process itself.

It felt like a blueprint; we never really got to transform it into something more creative and beautiful.

Our issues/group issues

I tried to make a list of what I remember were our primary concerns about group process, condensing them around themes or issues. I imagine that you may find yourselves resonating with some of them, thinking about your current and past group experiences. In fact, groups tend to have similar tensions and frictions as they develop through time and move from the honeymoon phase into different stages of existence.

Safety:

Is it safe to be me, even when I am not doing so well?

What if someone makes me the target of their process?

What if I experience unpleasant feelings towards someone in the group?

Is it safe or ok to express those feelings?

Being too much or being too little:

What am I supposed to do with my “internal soup” during the group process?

What if I take too much space?

What if someone else takes too much space?

Feeling invisible:

Does anyone see my pain?

I have this torment screaming inside. How can it be that no one seems to hear it?

Fairness and appropriateness:

What is fair and appropriate to share in a training group?
What are the rules here?

Belonging, identities and diversities:

Do I belong here?
Am I seen and valued for who I am, with my personal and professional background?

Power, leadership and container:

Who holds the power?
What are the roles?
Is there a substantial container?
Will "they" hold me/us?
Can I trust "them"?
Are "they" committed?

Confusion about the purpose:

Why do we have a group process?
What is it for?

There was a small group of us – a group where I would situate myself - who felt that doing group process was essential for our wellbeing as a group and relevant to the training. But even so, I was not able to fully grasp why it was so crucial. Now, with more experience, more reflection, and a better sense of myself as a Hakomi therapist and person, I am happy to share my perspective on the group process and why I believe it to be central to the development of a Hakomi therapist.

I feel particularly passionate about the "why?". Having been a teacher for more than 20 years, I believe that in pedagogical processes it is essential to show students the direction of their growth, where we want to take them or what we envision for them through the little steps – sometimes pleasant, sometimes not – that we are asking them to make. So, here are my rationales for dedicating time to the group process.

The Group as a laboratory

I like to think of a Hakomi group process as the laboratory where we have the opportunity to experiment and apply the Hakomi Principles to our felt experience and the way it gets elicited - right here, right now - in the life of the group and the training itself. Group process is where we can learn how to look at, communicate and reach out to other group members according to the same Hakomi Principles: Mindfulness in the first place, but also Non-Violence, Unity, and Organicity. I would add to the official Principles the principle of Truth, which is the aim to be real, authentic, and honest – with yourself and others. This aim is an essential ingredient of this Hakomi journey. Probably its most significant challenge is how to find ways to complement Truth and Non-Violence.

Is this lab an easy or comfortable place to be? It can sometimes be, and sometimes not. But the potential consequences of going through it and allowing its chemistry to happen can be life-changing in many ways.

An opportunity for self-study regarding our relational life

Here I am sitting in the circle. Did I say the right thing when I made that comment? Was it appropriate? Who knows what they are thinking about me now! ABC sat on my place without asking for my permission, and I hate that, DEF is talking and talking, as usual, taking so much of our precious time. Luckily GHI is holding my hand, and that feels so good...

A group with a variety of members generates a massive amount of stimulation for everyone's nervous system. As the Group deepens and people become more familiar with each other, the process of differentiation starts. When differentiation increases, the occasions and quality of exchanges widen, everyone in the group is likely to represent an "experiment" to someone else, resulting in the possibility of being perceived as a nourishing and reliable "other", but sometimes also as a challenging thorn or an annoying trigger. This phenomenon is inevitable.

We are hardwired as human beings to respond to the environment out there – in our case, the group and its members – with thoughts and opinions, physical sensations, emotions, impulses, words, and reactions. The extended use of mindfulness, which we practice throughout our training blocks, sheds light on many automatic responses that we experience in social contexts, usually under the threshold of our awareness. However, mindfulness makes us transparent to ourselves. The ongoing Hakomi invitation to go inside and observe magnifies our way of dealing with this relational complexity. Such close encounters with our inner world can be a new experience for many of us. It can be scary and unsettling. It also represents an incredible source of information.

We all know now that from a Hakomi perspective, reactions are not objectively appropriate or inappropriate. We look at them with curiosity and interest, as psychosomatic adaptations which may lead us to meaningful insights about the origin of our ways of perceiving and organizing in a certain way around specific inputs.

Radical Mindfulness in the collective space

A Hakomi group process is where we learn to observe our reactions concerning the group at different levels step by step. That is, the individual, interpersonal, and the group as a whole, with its subgroups. In so doing, we have the opportunity to better understand who we are, what we need, where we come from, and our history with sociability and connection. We use mindfulness to help us feel/stay/name/accept/and possibly welcome what we might encounter through the lived experience of "being together".

There can be days and phases in which we mostly feel that our internal needs are being met, that it is safe to be who we are, that there is abundance, and that we are appreciated and loved. Mindfulness allows us to sink into and savor the joy and the power of these moments of positive connection in unprecedented ways.

There are also times in which we feel hurt, scared, alone, and unseen. Mindfulness helps us to get in touch with our bleeding wounds. Instead of sweeping our pain under the carpet, we take ownership of our own experience and disentangle our immediate responses from their historical background.

This approach is a dramatic shift.

Ideally, a Hakomi group process is the frame where each member contributes to creating a collective embroidery. Its warp and weft are made of everyone's awareness and capacity to take responsibility for the states we may fall into repeatedly. In a Hakomi group process, we want mindfulness to be not only an individual state. We stretch it to the point that it becomes a way of being *in relation*, embracing the same curiosity and non-judgmental stance towards ourselves and others. It is a radical declination of mindfulness that involves the dropping of our default labels - good VS bad; my fault VS your fault; wrong VS right – as we interact with the reality out there. It aims to navigate the complexity of being human beings in connection. It acknowledges that inhabiting the territory of a relationship may also mean sometimes feeling unattuned, contemplating our differences, hurting, and being hurt. It just happens. No one is an exception here.

We cannot control these experiences because most of the time frictions build up unintentionally as everyone tries to survive their life with their best set of tools, aiming to fulfill their basic needs of feeling safe, considered, free, seen, accepted and worthy. In this attempt, we are equal; we are together, and – as the Unity Principle teaches us – we do participate in the same universe.

In the best possible scenario, a Hakomi group process is an opportunity to sit with our pain, shame, or anger when it is our turn to be suffering and to watch the walls dissolve: you-against-me may transform into you-and-me. Each time a process of authentic communication takes place between group members and sheds light on unspoken tensions, it is as if the whole group takes a big breath and relaxes, shifting from confusion to clarity.

When parts of this living system – that we as a group represent – stop suffering in isolation and express their discomfort mindfully and honestly, the group as a whole can integrate that pain, reorganize and organically achieve a more updated culture of coexistence.

Mindfull skills

An honest, satisfying and active participation in group process or – more in general – to the life of a group rooted in the Hakomi Principles is not an on/off process. It means the progressive unlearning of our default responses and the acquisition of several mindful skills. Alongside the development of the core competence of **Self-awareness**, which I see as the close and all-partisan contact with our internal states as they continuously evolve, those skills are:

Self-regulation:

the capacity to modulate the intensity of our inner states

Self-management:

the capacity to internally and externally resource ourselves and manage our experience

Self-expression:

the capacity to mindfully name our experience

Feedback:

the capacity to mindfully inform others about their impact on us

Self-compassion:

the capacity to acknowledge and gently welcome our own weaknesses and imperfections

Compassion:

the capacity to attune from the heart and gently welcome others' weaknesses and imperfections

While taking our first and often tentative steps toward embracing these skills, it is possible to experience that we can be fully and organically ourselves in front of the others. At the same time, we can let others be fully themselves in front of us. As we dare walk down this new path, we often discover a certain quality of **Presence** to ourselves and the world out there, which can be extremely rewarding and can ignite our willingness to dare even more.

Becoming a Hakomi therapist

The gifts of this way of being relational – to return to the unwelcome guest – are far-reaching. We learn to become active contributors in creating a Hakomi culture with its specific vibe: open, understanding, warm, genuine, and safe. We are then able to translate this culture into our way of meeting our clients. As Hakomi therapists, group process represents a wonderful training for our Loving Presence muscle, even when it is hard. Patients who come to our office seeking help are often difficult people. Sometimes they are severely wounded. They show up in sessions with their ways of dealing with their reality that we may find absurd, exaggerated, convoluted, and even violent. Group process and its radical mindfulness teach us to "love" our clients, without necessarily liking them. It shows us how to contemplate another person with an open and judgment-free stance, recognizing their hidden gem, which is waiting to be unearthed and seen under the layers of unpleasant adaptations that we notice first.

The relational mindfulness that we foster through the group process and the application of our mindful skills support us also in using our selves as a therapeutic tool, through the honest and non-violent naming of what we feel as we meet our clients and their world. This naming also helps us to respond mindfully when clients give voice to their experience concerning us, involving us sometimes in very challenging ways. These moments of mindful truth between the person of the therapist and their patients are delicate and complex. Our comfortable chair may shake when we immerse ourselves in the interpersonal arena of our clients. It takes courage and also requires as Donna Roy, a Hakomi trainer and one of my supervisors, taught me - a certain "fierceness of heart."

Inviting the unwelcome guest to sit and have dinner - i.e., fully engaging with the Group Process time - may discipline the heart to become "fierce;" to be kindly authentic as we encounter the other and endure the discomfort of being mindful and being real.

After all, the unwelcome guest's gifts contain a promise: that all of this is possible.

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