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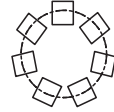
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## Engaging with the Median Group

*Cynthia Rogers*

*This article describes how an understanding of the dynamic processes activated in a median sized group can inform good clinical practice and influence the actions and attitudes of the group convenor and the participants. A median group can be used to encourage dialogue and understanding or to experience and engage with primitive unconscious processes. It sits at the interface of the public and the private sphere and provides a unique space to learn the skill of thinking and feeling in the presence of others.*

*The article indicates what the experience might be, why this particular size of group is employed, how resistances can be addressed, how to maximize creativity and what participants can expect to get from participation in median groups in different settings. Participants feel deskilled whilst learning how to engage. The reward is a window into a new level of awareness and relationships.*

*Key words: conversation, dialogue, group dynamic, projective processes, large group, median group, and dynamic administration*

### **Introduction**

Median groups are ubiquitous in training and organizations but there is not always an explicit conceptual framework in operation. The value and essence of a median group is lost if it is approached merely as a larger small group. This article describes my understanding of how the current theoretical understanding of median groups translates into practical good clinical practice. I will describe how I think

about median groups, the different styles of median groups and how my conceptualization of median groups influences my attitude and actions as a median group convenor.

### **Why a Median Group?**

In our increasingly global society we are members of multiple inter-connecting networks, rather than simply having individual relationships within small discrete groups. The median group creates a space where this experience can be explored as it operates at the boundary where the personal aspects of our identity move into the public arena. Median groups enable people to develop the capacity to think in a complex situation, identify the dynamic forces in operation and find a voice that can negotiate complex interpersonal and power relationships. The same skills are needed for a therapist working in settings with highly disturbed individuals where the relationship can be equally complex.

If we are to live in the world and work with one another it is helpful to have an idea of how we make sense of the world and the model we draw on to do so. Life is about managing ourselves in the presence of others. A deep understanding of our own personal unconscious and conscious assumptions is a good starting point. It is my view that we can see our own assumptions clearly when we experience them allied with or in conflict with others. This is both the excitement and the terror of a median group.

In my conceptualization of the median group the work is done through encountering the culture of the median group, which is created by the interaction of the members. The individual in the group will be pulled in many directions through alliances, values, ambitions and the need to stay sane. If the individual can observe him or herself, he or she can learn about what I think of as their unconscious assumptions. I am using unconscious here to simply mean out of conscious awareness. By assumptions I mean social and cultural influences that inform an approach to the world. Boarding school, the council estate or living behind the twitching curtain will all leave their mark. It is what has been introjected from the negotiation with the social environment that now seems a natural part of the individual. These assumptions come in with the milk from our communities of origin and it can be disconcerting to discover how much we expect them to be shared by those with whom we interact. These assumptions act as constraints, both enabling and constraining. I refer the reader to the work of Norbert Elias for a full description of this process (Mennell, 1997).

I think of median groups as having a membership of 12 to maybe 100 people but the number a median group can accommodate will depend on the context of the group and the existing network of connections. While a small group might have fluctuating sub-groups I think of a median group as having transient micro-cultures. The median group can embody the unconscious assumptions of its members as the group struggle with what kind of group this median group is going to be and how it is going to work. The group will be mediating each member's assumptions about how to behave; whether turn taking is valued or not, what level of conflict is acceptable, and what constitutes appropriate issues to bring to the group. Someone to whom fair play comes naturally will introduce that culture into the group, while another who thinks the world works best if everyone looks out for him or herself will introduce that culture to the group. As the contributions cluster around these themes micro-cultures emerge.

The predominant micro-culture may limit what can be said comfortably at any one time. It can be challenging to learn to think and communicate in a dissonant situation where comments cannot be tailored to be acceptable to, or fit the frame of reference of every individual present. As the individual struggles to speak from within the prevailing micro-culture they look for footing within it and become aware of the identifications and conflicts. It is initially the convenor, and later the group, embodying a culture of dialogue that holds the space where this interplay can take place.

Robert Plant (2003) visualized the multi-perspective approach of group analysis with reference to cubist art, where there is not one perspective but many, each explored simultaneously. In a median group one can be both oneself and one's role at the same time and hold the experience of 'I' at the same time as 'I' with all the projections and assumptions of being, for example, the 'older', the 'new', the 'black', or the 'influential' member of the group. It is also possible to experience oneself as the individual in the context of the family, which is in the context of the social situation past and present as it comes alive in the group.

## **Preparing for a Median Group**

### *Styles of Median Group Conducting*

Not all median groups are the same and the conductor's behaviour and technique will be tailored to the function of the group. When

working as a median group conductor my first question is ‘Which species of median group is this?’ I identify two distinct forms a median group can take.

- 1) The median group where communication, dialogue and intimacy are valued.
- 2) The median group primarily as an experience of primitive projective processes.

While there is inevitably overlap and the group function may change over time, the group conductor has a responsibility to maintain an awareness of which type of group he or she has been asked to, or intends to conduct. He or she needs to monitor whether that is what is happening in the room. Median groups of the second type, designed to maximize the experience of split off part object experiences, require the conductor to focus on containment and I will discuss these groups toward the end of the article.

#### *Challenging the Negative Responses to the Median Group*

Median groups stimulate a level of anxiety. This anxiety is often expressed by putting pressure on the conductor to agree to split up into smaller groups. Median groups are resourceful and find ways to justify a move to a small group. They may convey their belief that the only reason they are being asked to meet as a median group is to match the size of the ego of the conductor. They may go ‘on strike’ indicating that it is just impossible to work with this number of people. Others might suggest the issues at stake are too hot to handle in this setting and that someone, either the most vulnerable member of the group or the conductor, will get hurt. It will be the conductor’s fault, as he or she cannot say they did not warn him or her about the aggression in the group.

The resistance to median groups tends to lessen if the members understand why the work can only be done in this size group. They can see that if one is looking at cultural or institutional issues, the family sized group of eight is too small to replicate the dynamics and a median group is necessary. The conductor will respond to the anxiety taking into account which kind of median group it is. The response will be grounded in the conductor’s conceptualization of why he or she decided that the median group was the appropriate forum for these discussions. If the aim is to experience split off primitive feelings there may be a limited response but more usually

the conductor responds by modelling how he or she would like these anxieties addressed, and offering to enter into a dialogue about the feelings in the room.

In some settings it is possible to have a seminar prior to the median group where the whole purpose and function of a median group can be discussed and guidelines offered for consideration. More often the ideas about how to get the most from a median group can be mentioned by the conductor, either as part of introducing themselves and their role or dripping them into the group as and when the group is ready to hear the ideas.

### *From Initial Frustration to Creativity*

Joining or conducting a median group can be daunting. People dislike feeling deskilled and need to be forewarned that it takes time and effort to acquire the skill of using a median group. Members have to learn how to engage with a median group, rather like learning a language. It is a learning situation so it is frustrating. Initially the communication network is rudimentary and the frustration is all the greater (de Maré, 1991). In the median group situation one cannot simply tailor comments for the person addressed but one has to take into account the presence of the minds and experience of others. It can be uncomfortable and impatience drives members to try to use the skills appropriate to a small group rather than engage in the experience of not knowing how to be in a median group. In difficult circumstances individual thoughtfulness tends to be shattered by the effete pathological cultures surrounding the individual (de Maré, 1994). It is unlikely that anyone operating in a persecutory or bullying culture will be able to think creatively whatever his or her personal resources.

The group members will start to feel more comfortable if they can gradually move from addressing the carpet or the ceiling and talk to individuals or the whole group. I encourage the participants to use 'I' and speak for themselves resisting the temptation to speak for, or on behalf of others or to hide behind a role. The convenor can model this behaviour by engaging with individuals, sub groups or the whole group; looking at people, saying 'I think' and showing every sign of being genuinely interested in engaging in a dialogue with those present in the median group and helping those for whom it is a struggle to relate to the group.

While a median group occasionally follows a single thread of discussion it is more usual to have multiple threads pursued at multiple

levels simultaneously with each individual feeling that their comment has dropped into a void. It takes a while to learn not to expect a direct response and to tolerate the frustration of waiting to see if a thread develops that eventually knits the apparently disregarded contribution into the fabric of the group. If members contribute ideas from a position of free floating attention a new contribution may start a whole new thread, contribute to one or more existing threads or bring a whole series of disparate contributions together in a coherent thought, opening up the possibility of a new level of awareness and relationship.

It helps when members appreciate that their contribution counts and may just be the missing piece of the jigsaw that builds a group that can think together. The real creativity of a median group happens when members start to say what they think in the same way that they cast their vote, simply because they are expected to and the group develops enough ballast to think in an extraordinarily creative way (Rogers, 1987).

#### *The Composition of the Group*

A median group works well if there are some experienced members who have had the opportunity to learn how to use a median group and can model that for others. It also helps if people have, or can make, sufficient connections in the group to give them the security to participate. Often on a training course there will be a network of relationships derived from small group experiences of therapy and supervision. An individual experiencing the annihilation anxiety associated with taking a risk in a median group may well do so having first checked out that there are allies in the room. In most median groups there will be hidden alliances and unspoken conflicts. This is as it should be, reflecting the difficulty of operating away from the family in the outside world where we cannot accurately 'know' with whom we are interacting. A thoughtful median group conductor will have part of his or her free floating attention focused on the changing landscape of alliances and sub groups but avoid commenting in a way that fixes the moving relationships or privileges one view of sub grouping over another. In the absence of allies a member will rely on the competence of the conductor to sustain their confidence. The conductor has to earn this confidence by being willing to embody the authority bestowed on him or her by the group and challenge destructive processes and behaviour.

### **Convening a Median Group**

I identify two main ways that median groups focused on dialogue are used but my approach to each is similar.

- Median groups that enable group members to learn the art of dialogue so as to be able to communicate in a complex setting, presented either as self-reflexive research or as therapy.
- Median groups that hold the anxiety and assist in decision making in an organization or on a course.

In group analytic median groups I am fostering a quality of dialogue that Pat de Maré likened to ‘Kiononia’ or fellow feeling. Alongside conversation and personal storytelling a median group benefits from humour, metaphor and a rich tapestry of social, literary, historical, political and mythical themes, which can give expression to the conflicts in the group. (Douglas, 2001) In a median group plunging interpretations, catastrophic references and anything that tends towards massification needs careful attention to avoid the group sinking under the weight of it. It is not uncommon 15 minutes into a group for someone to start talking about some catastrophic event somewhere in the world. While it appears to be addressing weighty issues that a group might tackle, I tend to ask myself whether it is indeed that. Might it be a representation either of grandiosity or of the anxiety and overwhelming feelings of the participant who unconsciously would like the group to stall rather than wander into difficult territory? There is an implicit injunction against moving on, since to return to the mundane matters of our own minor concerns and relationships seems insensitive and uncaring. However I think this has to be challenged if the group is not to become stuck overwhelmed and suffer from inertia.

I think of group analysts as researching the unconscious. Together with their group members they reflect on the experience of their groups, leaning from their observations, ideas and experience. A median group can be set up explicitly to offer the opportunity to develop the skills needed to think and relate to so many people at once and to understand what makes it difficult. Interestingly people who have grown up in large families may be more comfortable in a median group than a small group. They understand how to keep thinking in the presence of others. Big issues seem to benefit from attention in a bigger group. Cultural, political and religious oppression is often revisited alongside other members who understand the experience whilst relying on the wider median group membership to



ensure the more benign culture of dialogue prevails to support the experience. What a group can manage will depend of the depth of understanding and experience. It would not be wise to expect a new group to handle the same issues as a group that has been meeting regularly and has a long history and experience to draw on.

Pat de Maré gathered people together, meeting regularly for many years, researching their own experience and contributing to the body of knowledge about median groups. The black and white group was an important application (Ferron, 1991). Goran Ahlin (2010) has described how Group Analytic Society meetings using median and large groups have evolved. In large groups he points out the importance of favoured voices that act as culture brokers and culture carriers. Established median groups sometimes unconsciously tire of integrating new members and sink into the comfort of a static unit and shrink. At other times their genuine enthusiasm is mistaken for proselytizing.

Group analysts running day centres draw extensively on this experience to address the personal social issues that can limit the progress patients make when attempting to take their place in society. Training staff and introducing patients to the thinking behind the use of median groups as therapy will be helpful but establishing a culture where the group is valued is as important. Therapeutic communities have contributed hugely to the development of larger groups and provided a vast reservoir of training and experience in conducting and participating in large and median groups.

### *Courses*

Introductory courses in group analysis frequently have a median group where the aim is to acquire the skill of following complex threads of discussion and discover what one thinks. Group analytic qualifying trainings traditionally have a median group that has a dual role. The members are learning how to be in a median group whilst the median group is used to hold some of the stresses associated with a complex training. A course is the sum of the interactions between the individual participants, the staff members, the people making decisions on registering boards, current practitioners and the legacy of all the earlier decisions the occupational group have made. A median group can embody this and help the students to find a voice to engage in dialogue with their own and their colleague's experience of participating in, and meeting the demands of, the situation we call a course.

Course participants' feelings and anxieties can sometimes be expressed in term of the provision of biscuits, tea and coffee. One could

make a classic interpretation about lack of nurturing from the staff or wanting to be spoon-fed but I think it is more interesting to take it seriously in the median group. It can be used to really think about where authority and responsibility lie on the course and who has the possibility of acting, thereby pre-empting a dependant complaining culture developing. In a median group one can explore the nature of authority, experience people taking or challenging authority and use metaphor to explore the unconscious assumption that come into play. The group can explore the influence of early social experiences, and other interpersonal elements that have built towards a person's idea of their capacity to act. Alongside that I could imagine historical references to Marie Antoinette 'let them eat cake', biblical references to 'water into wine' and 'loaves and fishes', mythical references to poisoned apples, cinematic reference to Babette's feast and maybe a bit of word play linking it all together around wanting to 'have your cake and eat it'. In negotiating an authority model for the course a model linked to taking responsibility and respect is much to be preferred to the regressed one where the fear of the Gods is invoked to ensure compliance.

Students are aiming for an intimacy appropriate to the social setting of a course, which Pat de Maré terms Kiononia or fellow feeling. It can of course be a challenging part object experience. One looks to develop a language that is appropriate to dealing with the interpersonal difficulties that pervade training courses. Students of necessity feel deskilled and 'at sea' so issues of professional rivalry, sub grouping, envy, and competition for control and status need thoughtful attention. Positive feelings are almost more difficult to address and helping people leave courses well is a very valuable function.

If a median group is to play in the way I have described and not be circumspect about what is said, it needs good dynamic administration and to have some separation from the decision making process. Perhaps most creative is where the median group reveals misunderstandings that can be addressed and issues become unimportant. Where there are multiple conductors they model managing disagreement and difference as each naturally introduces their own way of being. The group builds on this playing with their own references to myths, films, anecdotes, quirky relationships and word play that allow processing of what is happening in the group.

### *The Median Group in Organisations*

In organisations the median group supports dialogue where institutional decisions impact on individuals. An organisation needs

culture carriers and a place to digest and influence change. It is through conversation that we change our mind. Creative organisational conversation is one person talking to another. It is you personally in your role speaking to me personally in my role. Christopher Rance (1998) describes how group analytic ideas can be used in organisational consultancy to focus on the management of oneself in the presence of others and especially the management of one's own and other's anxieties caused by the stresses of social interaction. It is not the format of the group that matters but the ideas about conversation and the median group mindset that the consultant brings to the meetings. I would not dream of running an organisation, a day centre, a therapeutic community or try to manage change in a staff group without a median group at the centre. Where better to discuss 'Who are we? What are we doing? Where are we going? How can we get there?' It is often the values embedded in the work that cause the most difficulty for staff in doing it and a median group can address this contradiction.

In any organisation one needs to be able to think and speak in the face of opposition. A well-run median group is an opportunity for participants to listen to others with an open mind, follow multiple threads of a conversation, not be distracted from the thread of interest and discover what they think. Dialogue is preferable to conflict and enables people to stand their ground where necessary. Hopefully they get some insight into how they communicate, and recognise that simply asserting something or shouting loudly does not make it right. People have to be able to follow the argument articulated. It is an opportunity to practise building alliances without being drawn into collusive relationships and to see other's flaws without becoming contemptuous. As the member is able to think more clearly it becomes easier to identify which issues have to be accommodated and which can be influenced. Teams that are overwhelmed and simply want to evacuate the bad feelings into the consultant will resist engaging in dialogue and the median group will become a bad object itself. It may be necessary to perform this unpleasant function for some time before negotiating another way of working. Phil Hartley and David Kennard (2009) have written specifically about staff support groups. Online groups are increasingly popular. I find it fascinating how individuals find themselves playing the same role for the group whether they are meeting online or in person and how disturbing it is when everything goes quiet.

### **The Median Group Primarily as an Experience of Primitive Projective Processes**

One can conduct a median group to maximize the part-object experience and disturbance in the group. As the group embodies the split off aspects of each individual's inner world it becomes a demonstration of the kind of unconscious processes one might encounter in intensive work with highly disturbed individuals. Developing a real respect for unconscious processes is perhaps the most important learning experience for a therapist. This is one effective way of doing it. Where median and larger groups have been used as tools to do this they have gained a reputation as uncomfortable, potentially destructive places.

Those who cared for them in childhood have frequently failed the patients who come for psychotherapy. When this scenario is recreated in the transference the therapist has to resist repeating the failure. The role is to hold the overwhelming feelings long enough to find a way of feeding them back but also of being able to model not taking on more than the therapist can handle. Psychotherapy trainings are challenged to instill in practitioners a healthy respect for unconscious processes and recognition that precisely because they are unconscious the therapist is vulnerable to them. Therapists in part-object dominated median groups find themselves in the grip of overwhelming feelings, experiencing and acting out aspects of themselves and others. The struggle is to carry on thinking and to risk engaging with this primitive part object world. The temptation is to withdraw.

Sometimes these groups are used as an arena to model how to engage with primitive destructive impulses but more often the students are left to process what is in reality a group phenomena on their own afterwards. A debrief of the experience can relocate the disturbed dynamic in the group and not in the individual. It is helpful to describe how members adopt 'familiar' roles for the group and are exploited to display or demonstrate primitive processes. Projective identification is ubiquitous and it is helpful for participants to discover which split off feelings they have the valency for and are liable to introject. Giving names to the feelings is immensely containing. Perhaps the most important is to be able to distinguish paranoia from persecution. Frequently one person is coached to express the narcissism for the whole group and then disparaged and treated contemptuously. In my view a median group conductor who conducts such a group has a duty of care to relocate the split off feelings where they

belong in the group as a whole and not allow members to stay identified with the group processes. A well-formulated understanding of how group process produces the split off part-object experience will help the participants to let go of the persecutory identification while retaining the learning experience. There is a place for these groups but problems arise when therapists, for whom this was their only experience of a median group, draw on this model to conduct therapeutic groups and staff groups with disturbing results.

### Conclusion

A median group is at its best when the members are thinking from their feelings and establishing a network of intelligent intuitive communication. Members learn how to carry on thinking and individuate in a complex network of relationships. This is particularly useful for people who cannot resist the temptation to place themselves in the eye of the storm. In the world of work these skills translate into defending the departmental budget and facing down envious attacks. Sitting comfortably at the boundary where private experience connects to the public arena it is possible to find a personal public voice.

The group convenor who has an explicit conceptual framework for the median group will be well placed to confidently recommend appropriate use of the median group, motivate individuals to join a median group and enable participants to fully engage in the group they have joined.

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