



Communication

The Hidden Currents of Groupwork: Latent and Manifest Processes

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Abstract

Human behaviour and interactions are complex, encompassing both what is immediately observable and what remains beneath the surface. Understanding these layers is particularly important in group therapeutic settings, where subtle dynamics can significantly influence outcomes. Literature explicitly addressing “manifest and latent processes” in group work remains limited. Most mainstream theories of group development, such as Tuckman’s stages, emphasize overt, measurable behaviours and structured task accomplishment, leaving latent processes, such as unspoken norms, emotional undercurrents, power dynamics, and unconscious motivations, underexplored. Recent trauma-focused group psychotherapy literature highlights this same gap, emphasising how latent relational and neurophysiological processes shape group functioning. This paper examines the interplay of manifest and latent processes in group development, emphasizing the importance of addressing both observable behaviours and hidden dynamics. The author intentionally anchors the conceptual foundation of this paper in classical groupwork theories, such as Tuckman’s stages of group development, Bion’s psychoanalytic insights, Vygotsky’s social constructivism, and the Johari Window due to their enduring relevance and widespread scholarly recognition. Concepts from the social unconscious sphere are also used to expand the understanding of latent dynamics beyond the individual psyche, acknowledging broader societal influences that shape the group space. This conceptual paper critically synthesizes these established and contemporary theories to explore the complex interaction between observable (manifest) and hidden (latent) processes within groupwork. Rather than proposing a new theory, it offers an integrated interpretation of existing scholarship by bringing classical and contemporary perspectives into dialogue. This synthesis advances a more nuanced understanding of group dynamics and highlights practical considerations for facilitation that attends to hidden or unspoken processes through a reflective, multidimensional lens. Practical implications are highlighted. This includes how facilitators can enhance group effectiveness by attending to both observable behaviours and underlying group dynamics, integrating reflective practice and awareness of personal bias to promote trust, psychological safety, and cohesive participation.

Keywords

Group Dynamics, Manifest Processes, Latent Processes, Facilitation, Reflexivity

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1. Introduction

Human behavior and interactions are complex, encompassing both what is immediately observable and what remains beneath the surface [1]. Understanding these layers is particularly important in group therapeutic settings, where subtle dynamics can significantly influence outcomes. While group therapy literature recognizes implicit dynamics, explicit theorization of manifest and latent processes as an integrated facilitation lens remains comparatively underdeveloped [2]. Most mainstream theories of group development, emphasize overt, measurable behaviors and structured task accomplishment, leaving latent processes, such as unspoken norms, emotional undercurrents, power dynamics, and unconscious motivations, underexplored. Recent trauma-focused group psychotherapy literature highlights this same gap, emphasizing how latent relational and neurophysiological processes shape group functioning [3, 4]. Covert and undercurrent dynamics are especially pronounced in applied settings, where facilitators navigate both explicit and subtle dimensions of group interaction in real time. This paper strategically anchors its conceptual foundation in classical groupwork theories that will be further discussed. This intentionality is imbedded in the reasoning that these well-known theorists have enduring relevance and widespread scholarly recognition. Recent literature is also integrated selectively to enrich, rather than replace these established frameworks. In this way, the author has ensured that this conceptual piece remains grounded in well-known theoretical traditions while still reflecting on contemporary viewpoints, with the aim of opening up critical dialogue on the discussion. The problem statement formulated centered on the limited conceptual integration within the groupwork literature regarding how manifest (observable) and latent (hidden) processes interact across the group life cycle, and how facilitators can effectively identify and respond to these dynamics.

2. Conceptual Approach

The paper critically examines the interactions between manifest and latent processes within group process, integrating psychoanalytic understandings with group development and social perspectives [5-8]. Additionally, concepts from the social unconscious expand the understanding of latent dynamics, acknowledging broader societal influences that shape a group space [9, 10]. Rather than proposing a new theory, it offers an integrated interpretation of existing scholarship by bringing classical and contemporary perspectives into dialogue. This synthesis advances a more nuanced understanding of group dynamics and highlights practical considerations for facilitation that attends to hidden or unspoken processes through a reflective, multidimensional lens.

3. Groups as Complex Social Systems

Groups function as dynamic, interdependent networks

where individual behaviors, emotions, and interactions shape collective outcomes [2]. Some processes are explicit and observable, referred to as manifest content. These include role allocation, verbal communication, and task execution. Beneath this surface lie latent processes, including unspoken norms, implicit hierarchies, emotional undercurrents, and unconscious motivations, which profoundly influence group functioning [2, 11, 12]. More recent group-analytic perspectives similarly emphasize these underlying nuances of communication and meaning that operate beneath verbal exchanges [13, 14].

The various stages of the group process are characterized by dynamic interactions, shifting roles, and layered processes that unfold over time. Using Tuckman's [5] stages of group development provides a useful theoretical underpinning framework to introduce and explore the multifaceted system of groups. This lens illuminates how the visible and hidden dynamics of a group evolve as members interact and engage with one another under the leadership of the facilitator.

Effective leadership is central to group work, as the leader's approach shapes not only task accomplishment but also the quality of interpersonal interactions, trust, and cohesion within the group [15]. Cole [15] describes three types of leadership styles: directive, facilitative and advisory. Among these leadership styles, a facilitative approach is particularly suited to balancing manifest processes and latent processes. This is consistent with research showing that facilitative, relational leadership addresses defensive functioning and enhances emotional regulation in group psychotherapy [16].

During the forming stage, the manifest processes are readily observable [5]. Members introduce themselves, clarify their roles, and establish ground rules. Beneath these visible behaviors, latent anxieties often emerge, including fear of judgment and dependence on leadership style employed. Hidden currents potentially shape interactions in subtle ways, and facilitators play a critical role in fostering psychological safety by recognizing and addressing these underlying concerns [6, 12, 17]. Trauma-informed group models further note that early-stage interactions can activate neurophysiological threat responses that subtly influence group safety and cohesion [4].

The storming stage demonstrates the intensification of group complexity. Manifest behaviors such as disagreements, resistance, challenges to authority and even long periods of silence are readily apparent. Simultaneously, latent processes, including competition, unspoken hostility, and hidden alliances, shape the social fabric of the group. These deeper dynamics reflect struggles over autonomy, identity, and recognition, requiring facilitative guidance to engage with both the overt and covert aspects of group life and maintain cohesion [5, 6, 11, 12]. Attachment-informed group research confirms that conflict often reveals underlying attachment-based interaction patterns that influence how members seek or avoid closeness [18].

As the group progresses to norming, manifest processes such as role distribution, consensus-building, and collaborative routines become more established [5]. Latent dynamics still persist in the form of subtle hierarchies, unspoken agreements, and patterns of inclusion or exclusion [9, 14]. Facilitators must remain attentive to whose voices dominate and where silent power dynamics might influence participation, underscoring the ongoing interplay between observable behaviors and underlying social structures [6, 10]. These emerging norms further reflect the operation of the group's social unconscious, shared, unspoken assumptions shaped by broader sociocultural forces [9].

In the performing stage, the group demonstrates high levels of coordination, communication, and problem-solving, manifest behaviors that signal functional effectiveness [5]. Beneath this visible performance, latent processes of trust, loyalty, and implicit collaboration provide the foundation for innovation and sustained productivity [6, 12, 20]. Facilitators support ongoing performance by nurturing authentic relationships and attending to the social cohesion that sustains effective team-

work [5, 6, 12, 20]. Synchrony and co-regulation at a nonverbal level support group cohesion at this stage [4, 19].

Finally, during adjourning, manifest behaviors focus on task completion, review of achievements, and formal closure [5]. Latent processes, however, reveal the emotional dimensions of separation, including grief, nostalgia, attachment, or unresolved conflict [6, 20]. Effective facilitation at this stage involves creating space for reflection, acknowledgment, and closure, recognizing that the emotional and relational dynamics of the group persist even after the formal task has ended [5, 6, 12, 16, 20].

4. Discussion

Figure 1 displays an integrated perspective combining Tuckman's stages, psychoanalytic theory, social constructivism, Johari Window, and reflexivity is pertinent for facilitators to recognize and attend to both observable and hidden dynamics [5-8, 12].

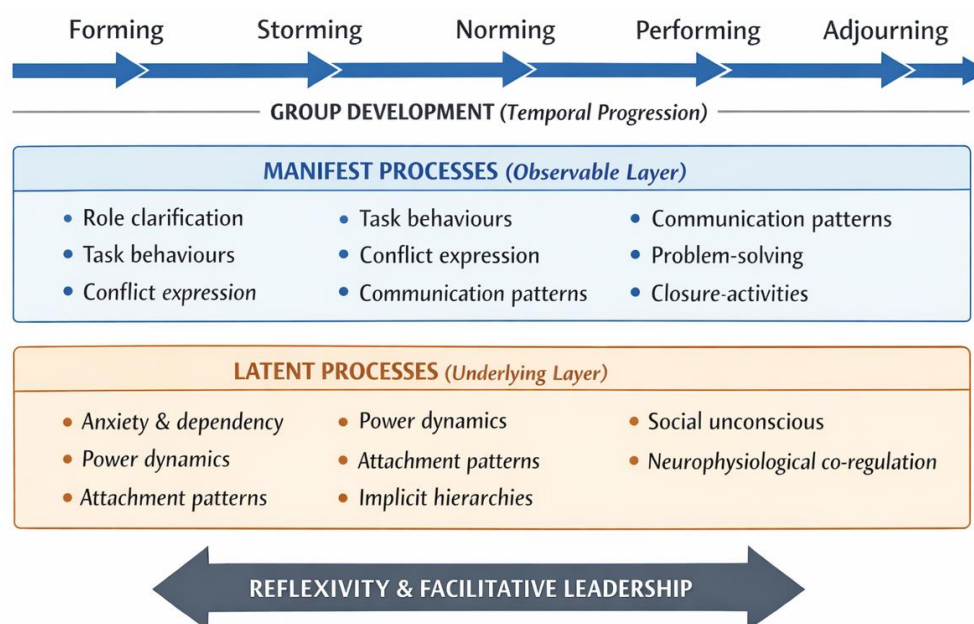


Figure 1. Manifest content and latent processes across group development.

With the awareness of theory that underpins groups, the facilitator is then able to respond adaptively to tensions which then supports collaboration and meaningful participation by group members. Reflexivity involves the facilitator's ongoing examination of how their own positioning, assumptions, and relational responses shape unfolding group processes [21]. This means that through active engagement in group interactions, facilitators consider deeper insights through challenges encountered and relational experiences that prompt deeper self and group awareness [21]. When supported by leadership theory as part of their therapeutic framing, facilitators are able to create an environment that encourages the development of

therapeutic factors while also encouraging self-development through reflective practice within an ongoing basis [12, 15, 20, 21].

Understanding the interplay between manifest and latent processes, rather than viewing traditional theories in isolation, requires an integrated lens that accounts for developmental, psychological, social, and reflective dimensions. Recent research indicates how defensive functioning and interpersonal patterns shift in relation to manifest group climate and latent dynamics [5-8, 16, 18, 20].

As dissected above, Tuckman's (1977) stages of group de-

velopment foreground manifest behaviors, such as role negotiation, conflict, and collaboration [5]. At the same time, there is also the implicit acknowledgement of underlying dynamics that influence behaviors. This is where psychoanalytic insights from Bion⁶ become critical, deepening the awareness of latent anxieties, unconscious motivations, dependency needs, and hidden alliances. Group-analytic frameworks expand this understanding by emphasizing shared, collective, and often unconscious social processes that influence group behavior [9, 13].

Vygotsky’s⁷ social constructivist perspective deepens this integration by situating both manifest and latent processes within socially co-constructed interactions. His emphasis on co-regulation resonates with contemporary neurophysiological models of group synchrony in trauma work as well as The Johari Window that provides a practical mechanism for translating latent dimensions into conscious awareness [4, 7, 8]. The structured exploration offered by the Johari Window

complements the identification of unintentional microaggressions and implicit bias that may operate within the group’s social unconscious [8, 10].

Reflexivity is stressed once again to be foregrounded in order to view the different positions the facilitator as a “participant-observer,” needs to occupy [21]. Reflexivity is also essential for recognizing how facilitators themselves may be drawn into enactments or reenactments of latent dynamics [3].

No single group theory sufficiently explains the complexity of group functioning. An integrated theoretical lens recognises their complementary contributions to understanding the complex interplay between manifest content and latent processes. Table 1 captures in summary both traditional and the contemporary group-analytic and trauma-informed perspectives to further enriches this integration, especially regarding the social unconscious and neurophysiological responses that shape latent processes [3, 4, 9].

Table 1. *Theory that informs the understanding of manifest and latent group processes.*

Theoretical perspective	Theoretical contribution towards an integrated understanding of group processes
Tuckman’s Group Development Theory [5]	Provides a group developmental perspective for understanding observable group processes, including roles, conflict, cohesion, and collaboration, while acknowledging underlying relational influences on group progression.
Bion’s Psychoanalytic Theory and Group Analytic Perspectives [6]	Illuminates latent group processes, including unconscious anxieties, defensive patterns, relational dynamics, and collective meanings that shape observable group behaviour.
Vygotsky’s Social Constructivist Theory [7]	Positions group development as socially constructed through interaction, co-regulation, shared meaning-making, and reciprocal relationships between members.
Leadership Theory [15]	Highlights the facilitator’s role in shaping group climate, psychological safety, participation, and the emergence of therapeutic factors through intentional relational leadership.
Johari Window and Reflexive Practice [8, 12]	Support the movement of implicit processes into awareness by encouraging exploration of blind spots, assumptions, biases, and the facilitator’s influence as a participant-observer.

5. Conclusion

Latent processes are fundamental rather than peripheral to effective group facilitation. By being attuned to unconscious motivations, implicit norms, and underlying emotional currents, facilitators can anticipate potential conflicts, foster trust, and cultivate a climate of psychological safety. Awareness of these hidden dynamics not only strengthens group cohesion with manifest behaviours, but also enhances problem-solving, decision-making, and overall group outcomes and therapeutic value. Recognizing and engaging with the latent dimensions of group life transforms facilitation from reactive management of surface behaviours into proactive guidance of deeper relational and emotional processes, ulti-

mately supporting richer and more sustainable group functioning.

6. Limitations

This paper is conceptual in nature and is based on the synthesis of existing theories, rather than empirical investigation. Consequently, the suggestions made regarding how facilitation can address manifest content and latent processes should be viewed as a conceptual lens, with indications of application value to practice. Furthermore, the paper acknowledges broader societal influences through the concept of the social unconscious, however, does not comprehensively examine how cultural, contextual and sociopolitical factors within context shape group process.

7. Recommendations

This paper is intended to stimulate further discussion and empirical investigation of manifest and latent processes across diverse group settings and facilitation contexts, thereby contributing to the advancement of groupwork literature. Future research should also examine how these dynamics manifest across different cultural and contextual settings to strengthen the applicability and transferability of this conceptual perspective.

Author Contributions

Zarina Syed: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

Zarina Syed is an occupational therapist and health professions educator with extensive involvement in student education, including clinical supervision, undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and research supervision within the field of mental health. She began her career in clinical practice across hospital settings in Cape Town and remains deeply passionate about advancing mental health practice through occupational therapy, with particular interests in group work interventions and therapeutic processes. Her academic work focuses on mental health, addiction care, public mental health, and the development of innovative approaches to health professions education. She also has a growing interest in policy literacy, curriculum development, and ethics in health professions education, particularly in strengthening the preparation of future healthcare professionals for equitable and reflective mental health practice.

Research Field

Zarina Syed: Health Professions Education, Mental Health and Group-Based Interventions in Occupational Therapy, Addiction Care and Public Mental Health, Curriculum Development in Health Sciences, Policy Literacy in Higher education, professionalism, Ethics and social accountability in Professional Training.