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**On the position and (dys)function of the omega role in the dynamics of a group.**

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*Summary: After **delineating all of the factors that define** a group, the concept of "role" and in particular that of the **Omega figure are dealt with in detail**. The functions **that the Omega role** assumes in the process of a group are described in order to discuss – with various case vignettes as examples - the possible ways in which the leader can deal with this role.*

**Preliminary remark**

The role model presented below, which was developed by the psychoanalyst and group therapist Raoul Schindler in the 1960s, is helpful when it comes to recognizing and understanding the dynamics of a group as a whole as well as the different positions and functions of the individual participants (which are never static, but always developing and changing). It contains - like all theoretical models that have emerged from practice - the possibility of grasping the multi-layered and complex processes that take place in a group from a certain perspective. And it bears - like all models - the danger that we only perceive what we are attuned to and overlook other phenomena. This danger can be avoided if we are aware of it.

**The Omega role** is generally seen as a dysfunctional role that disrupts the working process of a group. To understand the context of this role, which can certainly also be a constructive one, and its importance in the overall group process, an excursion into group dynamics is needed. First, however, a brief look at what turns a collection of people into a group in the socio-psychological sense, as well as a look at those factors that determine and control the dynamics of a group.

**A group** can be defined as a social whole, an organized system of individuals having a common task, who develop reciprocal role relationships and role-specific functions, who interact with each other, who have binding norms and who feel connected to each other over time.

A group is a living organism that - like all living things - is constantly changing, that comes into being, develops and passes away. Raoul Schindler sees the starting point of every group formation as its orientation towards an 'interlocuter', an 'opponent', in which this opponent can be all other groupings, but also includes the tasks and assignments that the group 'encounters', through which the group finds its uniqueness.

The dynamics of a group are determined by the following forces:

1. the members' desire for cohesion and progress,
2. the interdependence of the members,
3. the tendencies towards integration and differentiation,
4. the transference and counter-transference reactions that arise,
5. the developmental phases that a group goes through in the course of its life,
6. the different roles that the members take on.

The last aspect, that of role, I would like to discuss in more detail below.

The role

In communication and interaction, group members seek to satisfy basic human needs, they want to belong to the group and they want to distinguish themselves from the others. They make rankings, and form subgroups and alliances. Additionally, they take on (permanently or temporarily) certain roles. – But what is meant by the term 'role'?

The four-factor model of TCI can also be used to look at the complex issue of the emergence and definition of 'role'. The role is not a characteristic of a person, but arises through the integration or the intersection of the three factors: the I (= the personality of the individual group member), the WE (= the totality of the expectations that the participants have of an individual group member and which develop and change depending on the ongoing group process) and the IT (= the task, the matter at hand). The GLOBE is the surrounding relevant social system with its cultural givens (values, norms, symbols, behavioral demands).

The role that develops and changes at the intersection of personality, group, task and culture is thus a set of culturally determined behaviors characteristic of the person holding a particular position, which must correspond to the possibilities of the individual, the expectations of the others and the demands of the task.

### Roles, positions, functions

*Position* refers to the place assigned to a group member and the amount of influence that he or she can have: *Function* refers to the activity associated with a position. The *role* is therefore the dynamic aspect of the position. The following positions, roles and functions in a group can be identified:

Position	Role	Function
Society	----	Provides standards and exerts pressure to reform
<b>Alfa</b>	Leader, favorite, chief	a) <i>Locomotion, moving forward</i> : Initiating and carrying out action against opponents, Task accomplishment. b) <i>Cohesion</i> : establishing and maintaining internal cohesion, stability of the group and its capacity for action and work. c) <i>Representation</i> : of society, group norm and peer pressure d) <i>Object of identification</i> for the group members
<b>Beta</b> a) conditional pro b) conditional contra c) ambivalent	Professional (proficient) Trainer, Critic Power behind the throne	Participation at a distance with conditions Correct Criticize Compromise and tolerance
<b>Gamma</b> a) identificatory-participatory Gamma. b) complimentary-participatory Gamma c) critical-monitoring Gamma	Follower Adjudicator or assistant  Member  Confessor, Inquisitor Guardian of standards	Participating, articulating, solidarity, saying yes, agreeing, being passive, idealizing the leader  Adding  Diligent checking/monitoring
<b>Omega</b>	Outsider, black sheep, representative of the rejected	Protesting from a weaker position, opposite to Alpha, (weak) representative of the opponent and counteraction; saying no, aggression and destruction
<b>Opponent</b>	Can be a person, idea, ideology, institution	Counteraction, stimulation and maintenance of the group by uniting against a common external enemy.

Table 1: Position, Role, Function. Rubner/Rubner, 1982, S. 66 (according to Schindler 1957, 308 a.f., and to Heigl-Evers 1973, 37 a.f.).

### **Role and function of the omega position**

Just like in the Greek alphabet from which the designations are taken, the Omega position is diametrically opposed to the Alpha position. The description as "last of the group" does not do justice to the function, because Omega is also able to see and articulate the resistant and questionable aspects of a task, a leadership intervention and/or the problems and conflicts inherent in the group. Omega is therefore also the one who speaks out desires in the group and can be an indicator of expected and necessary changes and developments. However, the defensive and rather negative, often aggressive articulation with which Omega contributes his perceptions and feelings makes acceptance by the other group members difficult, so that he often finds himself in a powerless or marginal position. If he gets stuck in this position, Omega can become an outsider, a scapegoat, or a clown for the group, which in turn deflects its own resistance and ambivalence in him. If Omega repeatedly behaves in such a disruptive way that he seriously endangers the group's ability to work and the group leadership does not succeed in integrating him or what he expresses, it can happen that Omega is expelled from the group. What happens then is as it is described in the Bible in the case of the scapegoat. The rejected, the unaccepted is projected onto him and 'sent into the wilderness' with him. However, the initial relief at the departure of this troublesome group member does not generally last very long, because another participant soon assumes this role and is made the scapegoat. This danger is always present when it is not possible to make that which is represented by Omega - that has been repressed and expelled - conscious and then to integrate it into the group and work process.

Before I turn to concrete case studies to illustrate the theory presented so far, I would like to describe some possible manifestations of the Omega role, which often come in dysfunctional shapes and guises.

First, there is behavior that deviates from the mainstream and the conscious or unconscious norms of the group. In TCI groups, for example, appreciative and open interaction with each other is demanded and also cultivated.

If a group member is permanently deprecating, aggressive and/or closed, then he or she is very quickly ends up in the omega position.

Or a participant blocks the further work of the group repeatedly by, for example, refusing suggestions that come from the leader or from other participants, or by going off on side issues that have nothing to do with the actual topic, or by stubbornly sticking to his own point of view. The introduction of the disturbance postulate, which seems to fit so well with TCI, can nevertheless also lead to a serious disruption in the development process of a group. This occurs when a member uses it to continually draw attention to himself and to assert himself with purely personal, sometimes even marginal contributions that are not focused on the group's goals.

Other attempts to constantly draw attention to oneself can also lead to the outsider position. For example, when a person repeatedly speaks, at great length and very loudly, ignoring the fact that other group members would also like to say something. Or he or she pleads endlessly for his or her own ideas and philosophy in which hardly anyone is interested.

In general, too much focus on oneself, one's own ideas, and one's need to be noticed, which go hand in hand with little empathy and interest in the other group members, can provoke rejection and expulsion tendencies. But these can also be provoked by the opposite behavior, for example by continual silence, by withdrawal and by nonverbal signals of boredom and disinterest. And the group clown who repeatedly makes appropriate or inappropriate jokes, who apes others and clowns around, will also generally not meet with approval and acceptance. Although it is a different matter when - similar to a court jester - he defuses a threatening situation by making

humorous remarks or articulating a truth that has not been spoken before or has not been readily perceived.

These examples show that the Omega role is fulfilled by or attributed to a group member under two conditions. First, when, because of his personality and dysfunctional behavior, he deviates from the group norm and therefore is met with unwillingness or rejection and disrupts the group's work and development process. And second, when he acts on or represents something that "lives under the skin" of all, or most, repressed because it evokes fear and/or deviates from social and/or group norms.

### **Case vignettes**

The following case vignettes are intended on the one hand to flesh out what is, until now, a somewhat dry skeleton of theory and on the other hand to illustrate both how to address the various Omega roles in general, and how I have dealt with them in each case.

I begin with an example that illustrates the importance of taking an outsider position seriously. On the evening of the second day of a personality course, which until then had been marked by the relative openness of the participants, the process of sharing and coming together faltered. The group focused on one participant, Franz (all names have been changed), who until then had been more or less silent and had not told anything about himself. He was reproached by various participants for his silence on the grounds that it would inhibit the others from showing more of themselves. One woman underscored this reproach by saying: "It is as if we were all to undress, more or less, with only you remaining - like a voyeur - in your suit and tie, preventing us from showing still more of ourselves! As long as you don't tell more about yourself, I won't say anything either!" Since a large part of the group joined in on these attacks and continued to do so for a relatively long time, and Franz, now helpless, continued to remain silent I assumed that he represented something that concerned us all, to a greater or lesser extent. In order to make this 'something' conscious and also to prevent Franz from getting more stuck in the Omega role, I intervened by saying something like the following: 'Could it be that the great interest that Franz arouses in the group with his silence and the group's pressure on him to show more of himself has to do with the fact that with this behavior he provides an alibi, so to speak, for the others to go into hiding - just now, when we have possibly reached a point in the course that, if we were to go further, would ask more intimacy and openness of each of us? For all of us, now, it's probably a question of how much trust do I have in the group, what do I want to and what can I show of myself here without running the risk of being hurt or not accepted? As long as we can use Franz as a scapegoat for our own fears, we needn't become aware of them or even face them.' At first, this remark of mine caused an awkward silence in the group, until Elisabeth, who had been in the Beta role so far, said: 'Yes, that's true, at least for me. It's easier to fight Franz than to have to deal with my own unwillingness to get more involved!' In response to my question, directed at everyone but which I put specifically to Franz through eye contact, about what could happen if one were to show something more substantial of oneself than before, Franz replied in a flood of words: 'You could be ridiculed, hurt, exploited, exposed, appear weak or stupid, and I don't know what else!' This statement of his not only created compassion and acceptance in the group, but also made the other group members think about their own fears and threatening experiences that could be repeated here.

I have chosen this case vignette because it illustrates several things. On the one hand, it illustrates the task of the group leader to ask himself which attitude and theme dominating the group, but not yet consciously, a group member stands for at the moment, whenever a group focuses for a relatively long time on a group member and the theme he is acting on. When it is possible to

answer this question with the help of the group, there is an essential developmental step that has been taken. Secondly, this example also points to the necessity of protecting Omega figures and ensuring that they can be reintegrated into the group - precisely by pointing out that there is something in them that is in all of us. And thirdly, this small case shows that the different roles mutually influence each other, and that it is only their interaction that made something new possible: for Omega (Franz), for Alpha (in this case taken on by me), for Beta (carried out by Elisabeth) and for the various Gammas (most of the remaining group members).

Following this example, in which - also in hindsight - I agree with my intervention, I would like to describe one where I am less satisfied with how I acted. It is about my interaction with a group clown.

In a curriculum for prospective psychiatric nurses, my task was to provide a three-day course in which I was to give an introduction to TCI and the possible developmental phases of a group. The group was distinguished on the one hand by the fact that it was a required course and on the other hand by the fact that the group had been together for almost two years, so that the individual participants had already developed and solidified their roles. The interest for the theme varied across the board, from high to low. Already in the first session I led, I noticed a man, Otto, about 40 years old, who was constantly having side conversations with his neighbor. When I confronted him and asked that he share his contributions with the group, he said that they were not intended for everybody and anyway he was just telling a joke. This answer elicited amusement in the group, and mostly annoyance in me. My annoyance increased when he began to recite all sorts of (in my opinion) stupid sayings or silly poems that he himself had written, for example: 'Ruth Cohn, Ruth Cohn - who knows her?' or: 'TCI, TCI, it will soon be over!' Some group members reacted with laughter, while others - including myself - were visibly irritated. I was moreover afraid that my leadership of the group could slip away if I did not succeed in stopping Otto. In retrospect I think that I should have asked myself and the group the question of what they actually thought of this required class and of Otto's behavior, and whether he might have created a welcome distraction for anyone not in the mood for the lesson. Instead, at a given moment I asked Otto, rather irritably and authoritatively, to either keep his mouth shut or leave the course. In any case, I certainly didn't feel like having the group and myself be disturbed by him all the time. To my surprise, Otto stopped talking, and remained meekly and timidly silent until the end of the course. Admittedly, I had achieved what I wanted, but I had shown no interest in either Otto's attitude or that of his followers. After that, there were clear sub-groups that emerged, especially during the breaks; some rallied around Otto, others around me.

Here is another case vignette addressing the role of an outsider whose behavior was best described by the term "court jester." It occurred in a method course. One participant, Martin - a Germanist by profession - was from the very start mostly silent and generally held a marginal position in the group. Once in a while, however, he would share a quotation from literature that more or less fit what was taking place in the group. This usually evoked merriment, but it also sometimes contributed to a defusing of a situation. For example: a very dominant group member was attacked by a sub-group of rather weak group members because of his dominance. When the situation sharpened, with increased aggression, Martin spoke up with a quote from "William Tell," which gave an adequate, witty interpretation of the situation, and brought about a noticeable de-escalation: "United, even the weak become powerful; the strong is most powerful alone." At this moment, Martin shifted from an outsider to a leadership role, because with this quote he had a decisive influence on the following process.

To conclude, here is another example that this time shows the interaction between the group leadership and a permanently disruptive and thus correspondingly irritating group member. Already in the first session of a supervision course, I noticed a young woman, Lisa, who rolled her eyes angrily as soon as I mentioned the introductory topic, but did not say anything at first, participating obediently. As the course progressed, her behavior changed. She often interrupted me - sometimes even before I had finished my introduction to the theme and the structure - and said that she had either worked on this theme often enough in the course of her TCI training or that she considered it completely inappropriate at this point and in this formulation. In the beginning, I responded to her objections, asked her what bothered her, what she might want to be different, and how the group found my theme and Lisa's objections, etc., but then Lisa would tell me to forget it, that it just didn't fit. The other group participants, on the other hand, said that they were comfortable with the theme and the structure I proposed. Oddly enough, after expressing her criticism and listening to the others, Lisa usually joined in and went along with what the group was doing. Once, after she had attacked another group member in a similarly aggressive and disparaging manner as she had me, constantly interrupting him, I told her rather sharply that she must first let others finish speaking. To my astonishment, two men well-positioned in the group - rose to her defense and criticized me for the content and tone of my words. Only gradually did I understand that Lisa was perceived by most of the group members as weak and helpless and was therefore indulged and sometimes even protected. There was a lot of talk about her during the breaks, however, also because they found her disruptive and not really fitting into the group, but no one said anything during the sessions. Even I, becoming increasingly annoyed and inwardly aggressive towards Lisa, proceeded to let her talk and simply ignore her. I did this for several reasons. On the one hand, I didn't want to give her space and room repeatedly, and ultimately in vain, taking it away from the others, but on the other hand, I increasingly gave up hope of still being able to integrate her into the group, and thirdly, I had - I have to admit it honestly - no more strength and also no more desire to deal with her again and again. And finally, it also played a role that I was physically in very bad shape during that course, with severe back pain and having to take painkillers constantly. I shied away from the confrontation for two reasons: on the one hand, I feared that my pent-up anger could burst out violently and possibly also uncontrollably, and secondly, I feared that I would not be able to hold my own in a heated confrontation and possible attacks by the whole group - or at least a part of it. I lacked the strength or courage for that. Of course, this put me in conflict with my own ideal of a group leader, because I was well aware that my behavior was not optimal, that I was avoiding conflict and thus possibly failing to understand use the issue that Lisa represented - namely, the criticism of leadership, which other group members may also have had and may have spared me because of my visible back pain. Nor did I serve as a model for dealing with conflicts or help Lisa become more aware of the problem she had associated me with from the very beginning - and fought within herself. I consoled myself with the thought (perhaps these are also rationalizations) that the group remained able to work and was in a good mood, that, in the end, Lisa continued to participate and that thirdly, I also had a responsibility to myself and my physical capabilities.

*On dealing with representatives of the Omega-role*

Of course, much more could be said about this last case. For reasons of space, I will refrain from doing so and limit myself to the conclusions I draw from the examples given with regard to a possible handling of Omega roles.

In my opinion, a group leader must respond to the Omega figure when he or she:

- embodies something that makes an important and previously suppressed or neglected contribution to the overall group activity,
- is genuinely disrupting the group's work process,
- is in danger of falling outside the group or being expelled from it,
- the leader is so disturbed by her that the leader's own ability to work is impaired,
- can no longer participate because of her own, perhaps only momentary, problems.

The leadership, on the other hand, should not intervene if Omega

- is advancing the group through his or her behavior and potential,
- wants to draw attention to himself by permanent disrupting the group (because this would reward & reinforce this behavior),
- if the leadership - for whatever reason - does not feel up to the confrontation,
- the group itself is capable of understanding, using and integrating the potential that Omega may embody.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who provided me with the material for the case vignettes presented. I would be pleased if this article would stimulate discussion with the readers of this journal. I would be interested in the experiences that colleagues have had with the Omega role - in its functional and dysfunctional aspects.

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