Searching for Inner Resources: a Biosynthetic Experiential Group for Charles University Students

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Abstract: We will present our experience of running an experiential group based on the method of Biosynthesis, realized both online and in person from 2020 to 2022 (seven courses with a total of 68 participants) for students and employees of Charles University. As leading the group was not intended as research, the article is formulated as a case study complemented by a qualitative analysis of data from the final anonymous evaluative questionnaire. In the introduction, we will present biosynthetic psychotherapy as an integrative psychotherapeutic school combining psychodynamic, humanistic and body psychotherapy elements. The following section describes the specific format of the group and how it differs from group therapy: creating a safe space; structure of the meetings and methods of biosynthetic groupwork (moderated discussion, body work etc.). The next part describes the target groups, the team, examples of the discussed topics. In the last part, we will present the gains and challenges that the group brought. The main benefits of the group were self-knowledge, the possibility of sharing and connecting with other participants. The participants positively evaluated the activities, discussion topics and group facilitation, but had reservations about the organization. The main challenges are reflecting on emerging group dynamics and good group composition. The biosynthetic group represents a beneficial format for students, with and without specific needs, as well as for staff, while the benefit for Ukrainian students is questionable. Our results are only preliminary in nature.

Key words: biosynthesis, support group, body work, relaxation, body psychotherapy, students with disabilities, experiential group

Introduction

Biosynthesis is a psychotherapeutic school founded by David Boadella in the 1970s and further developed by him and his students (Boadella, 1987). It has been largely influenced by the vegetotherapy of Wilhelm Reich, father of body psychotherapy, but differentiates itself in that Boadella professed a gentler approach, focusing more on the client's own needs and pace and having more respect for their defence mechanisms rather than breaking them down forcefully (Boadella, 2017). Biosynthesis works with the body, including breathing, movement and touch, however, it cannot be confined to the category of body psychotherapy. Carefully studying the transference and counter-transference processes, it is rooted also in a more traditional psychodynamic approach (Boadella & Boadella, 2005). Boadella himself also took inspiration in some spiritual traditions and drew on humanistic and transpersonal psychology (Boadella, 1998). The contemporary form of biosynthetic psychotherapy tries to find its place within the international field of integrative psychotherapy, combining its body-therapeutic roots with knowledge from disciplines such as psychosomatic medicine, epigenetics and neuroscience (Carleton 2012; Večeřová Procházková 2020). While distinguishing itself from various forms of spiritual healing, it continues to explicitly understand spirituality/religiosity as an important dimension of mental health, thus representing a holistic approach.

Biosynthetic psychotherapy is intended mainly for one-to-one psychotherapeutic interventions, and it is currently not taught for group therapy use. However, it can be applied to groupwork in a manner that is not therapeutic but rather supportive, experiential, fostering self-development, and exploring new ways of experiencing the connection of one's mind and body. This article shows our implementation of such a group with Charles University students and employees.

Methodology

This article is intended as a case study with no ambition to present itself as a rigorous qualitative or quantitative evaluation. Our intention here is not to measure the efficacy of the support group, rather to inform the professional community of the format of our groups, to share our experience and what we consider to be the gains and challenges. We collected anonymous feedback at the end of every course by means of open questions in an online questionnaire tool. The feedback was not required in any kind of way. Based on a rudimentary form of qualitative thematic analysis, we identified five major groupings in the feedback. Another source of our evaluation is our own reflection, based on observation of the process of the group. We had a debriefing discussion after every session and in this respect, the role of the third facilitator-observer, who took minimal part in the session, was crucial for our internal feedback.

The format of a biosynthetic group

Differentiation from group psychotherapy

The biosynthetic group is designed as a structured supportive group. Like group psychotherapy, it has some therapeutic effect based on the sharing of one's issues, the lowering of social isolation, support from other participants, and the possibility to speak and be heard. Unlike psychotherapy, however, in this format we do not explicitly work with group dynamics (they do appear, however, as we show later). The participants are encouraged to speak about their experience but not to interact with others in a way that would interpret their experience, give unsolicited advice etc. The format is also different from a counselling group in that it does not give any ready-made solutions. Instead, we provide a safe space where members of the group can find their own solutions.

The role of the facilitators resembles, in some ways, that of moderators or lecturers rather than therapists. We do not have the ambition to mediate participant conflicts and aim at personal growth through insight into their maladaptive patterns of interpersonal behavior. If conflicts do occur, we limit ourselves to processing them on the "here and now" level with the aim of enhancing tolerance of and appreciation for interindividual differences.

Every group session has a clear topic, which is first introduced theoretically and then experienced through biosynthetic body work. The role of the facilitators is to guide the participants safely through the experience and provide a space to reflect on it. Though we might offer some brief ideas and reflections, we do not offer detailed feedback, interpretation or dissection of the stories of individual participants. Also, not being in the role of group therapists, we can allow ourselves to practice "selective authenticity". Instead of trying to be anonymous and impenetrable as dynamic group therapy would demand from facilitators, we can share bits of our personal experience, sometimes with the aim of helping others to share their story. This approach also brings about an air of collegiality. At the same time, we must take care not to abandon our posts as guardians of group boundaries, especially regarding clients with borderline type difficulties.

What we are presenting here is certainly not the only and correct way to conduct biosynthetic experiential group work. What we are describing here are the plans, methodology and outcomes that evolved in the course of our work with seven consecutive groups.

Creating a safe space

The first step we try to take in order to

create a safe space is choosing the participants in the selection process before the group begins. We interview every applicant and then, based on previous experience, try to establish the optimal combination of participants. The selection process is largely subjective, based on the impression and consensus of two interviewers. We consider general factors such as age (students range from 18-year-old first years to 40+-year-old PhD students and we try to have groups of a similar age, although we had success with two PhD students greatly enriching a mostly first-year group), motivation, and psychiatric factors, such as the presence/remission of psychotic mental illness, possible personality disorders, ongoing PTSD symptoms, autistic spectrum disorders etc. We do not have clear exclusion criteria and we accept participants with various psychiatric and neurodevelopmental disorders. Our aim is to try and make the group as balanced as possible and avoid constellations that would limit the possible gain of other group members. Such examples would include having several participants with borderline symptoms, which could create a strong group dynamic, or having several people undergoing acute recovery from trauma, which generally requires more attention from the staff.

During the interview, we introduce a set of rules, and we go through them again at the beginning of the course, with the possibility of discussion to adapt or

add to the rules. These include: 1. Confidentiality; 2. Respect for others - not judging them, not interpreting their experience, not interrupting them etc.; 3. The STOP rule - no one needs to talk or participate in body-work exercises, everything is just an offer; 4. Sharing "into the centre of the group circle" - everyone shares their own experience, not directly to someone else. We also ask if we can all address each other using our first names, which is grammatically and socially important in the Czech environment. Thus, we help the collegiality, as the participants always accept the first-name basis vote we conduct by asking them to raise their hands with eves closed. We also make clear that the course is only providing the participants with self-experience, not with any kind of training that would enable them to practice the techniques learned there with others or teach them to others. We make sure that they also know that we are not doing group therapy, nor do we offer emergency services. If necessary, we can provide them with appropriate contact information.

As we also provide individual care to Charles University students as therapists, we try to think of rules for bringing students with whom we do therapy or counselling into the group and offering individual care to group members. The former situation occurred several times, with some benefit to the individual process and we generally do not offer individual consultations to group members before the group has ended.

Structure of the meetings and the methods of biosynthetic groupwork

Throughout the course, we follow a set meeting structure. The meetings are two hours long, without any form of break. Members are allowed to leave the space if they need to, but are advised to stay for the whole duration if possible.

First, we sit in a circle, usually on the carpet with pillows and blankets, and welcome everyone. In the first meeting, we introduce the whole concept of the group and the rules again, we introduce ourselves and then every participant can introduce themselves as he/she wishes and say what they expect to gain from the group. At subsequent meetings, all of us say a few words about how we feel and whether we have something to say concerning the previous session. We find this step important, as we can gain important information about the current situation and can even change the programme as it is taking place in order to tailor it better, or avoid topics/exercises that could be harmful to some.

Next, there is a warm-up activity with the aim of directing the participants' attention to their bodies. This includes some basic biosynthetic techniques enhancing grounding, breathing exercises and gentle movement. We also use some simple elements from yoga, qi-gong or other forms of movement we have connected to our biosynthetic practice. These can be, for example, connected to biosynthetic concepts of life-fields, bringing together the levels of the mind, body and emotions (Lucká & Janečková 2017), or motor-fields that describe basic movement patterns, organized in pairs such as flection and extension (Boadella 2009a, 2009b; Večeřová Procházková 2020).

The third part introduces the topic of the day. The leading facilitator has a short theoretical presentation on a topic that is connected with the expected issues of students, as seen from the perspective of biosynthesis. The topics chosen range from general coping with stress, finding one's own place in the world, dealing with relationships, understanding one's own emotions, to more practical topics related to managing studying for exams, school/work-life balance, and time-management. A free discussion on this topic follows where the participants share their views and personal experience. Although no one is forced to speak at this point, we encourage members who are usually silent by asking them if they would also like to share their view. When no discussion starts, we share our own view on the subject and thus give the members, who are often not used to group sharing, an example of what they can share. At this stage, we limit interactions that turn the group sharing into a pair discussion.

In the next part, the facilitator guides the participants through the relevant experiential part, which usually includes some form of body work, but can include drawing, working with photography, writing, or working in pairs. The body work can comprise breath work, relaxation, mindfulness or somatic meditation (Večeřová Procházková 2020), movement, like the warm-up part, but while the warm-up serves to bring attention into the body, the later part is more reflective, aiming at deeper experience related to the topic of the day. Work in pairs is sometimes introduced, which can include grounding techniques, giving support, contact, creating safe limits, someone to lean against.

After the longest part, the experiential exercise, there is a place for reflection. On some occasions, we invite the participants to draw what they experienced, but we always provide some space for verbal reflection, even though no one is forced to speak. Talking can create a sort of bridge between the mostly abstract body-emotion experience and give some meaning to it while, at the same time, confronting one's experience with the group, the outside world. This brings into play the higher functions of the personality and also lets us know if the participant remains in a somewhat dissociated state or needs our further attention.

Finally, we do the closing sharing round when everyone says how they feel

at the moment and what they are taking from the meeting. We also encourage them to tell us when they know they will not be present at the next meeting as we try and keep the group consistent and discourage absence.

From the point of view of the whole course, we roughly follow the structure of the body-psychotherapy group phases suggested by Röhricht, Papadopoulos and Priebe (2013). In the first phase, we aim at creating our relationships and a safe environment, in the middle phase, we enable the participants to go deeper into their experience, and in the final phase, we concentrate on recapitulation and integration of the experiences (here we differ by not doing any evaluation of psychopathology or coping skills). The very last session has a different structure than the previous meetings and focuses mainly on the integration and proper conclusion of the whole course.

We also ran one group for Ukrainian students in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as there are many students from Ukraine studying at Charles University. This group had a different aim and structure; it consisted of five meetings, and the main goal was to provide the students with a safe space to share their experiences and fears and to prevent traumatization. It consisted mainly of talking, some education about stress reactions connected to traumatization and small amounts of body work aimed mainly at grounding.

Running the groups

General information and the situation during the pandemic

We ran seven group courses with a total of 68 participants between 2020 and 2022. We designed the courses for faceto-face meetings but because the beginning of the first course overlapped with the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic, we shifted the programme online (see Gains and Challenges for further info). We started meeting face-to-face in the 2021 Autumn semester. One course usually had 12 sessions, but this changed according to the length of the university semester. The group was run under the auspices of the Carolina Centre of Charles University and was free for the participants.

Target groups and participants

The group was originally intended for special needs students but as they did not fill the course, we opened it for students without the special needs status. This status can be obtained by students with physical/mental disability to gain accommodation for their needs in their studies. As the format turned out to be successful and the public's mental health was severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, we also organized two courses for Charles University employees. In the Summer of 2022, we also ran a special course for students from Ukraine, as mentioned above.

The team

Biosynthetic groups are more often seen having two facilitators and two assistants: our format had three facilitators, all paid for by the Carolina Centre: Dana Kneřová, Matváš Müller and Lukáš Pánek. There are three roles: the main facilitator, who guides members through the whole meeting, the secondary facilitator, who does the warm-up activity; and an assistant who primarily observes the process and gives feedback in the debriefing after the meeting. If necessary, the assistant helps the other two with the facilitating or does a pair exercise with participants who do not have a partner. We used a slightly different format for the Ukrainian group, and the team was also different (Eva Hafoudhová instead of Dana Kneřová). All of us are trained in the biosynthetic psychotherapy method.

Examples of session topics

The course opens with the topic of grounding, the ability to be present in the moment, to be in connection with one's body and one's surroundings, in contrast to being in a state of dissociation, daydreaming, or engulfed by anxious expectations for the future or depressing ruminations about the past. We introduce a grounding exercise after making sure the participants understand the concept and recall some instances when they experienced good grounding.

We continue with making a deeper connection to the body and with trying to find patterns and resources that are passed on in our family, in our culture. This is also incorporated by an imaginative exercise in which we see ourselves as deeply rooted trees, flexible in the wind.

Being centred is one of the next topics, as we explore the concept of giving attention to ourselves and to others, following our own needs and orientating towards the needs of others. We found out that it is quite normal for students, especially in their first years of study, to follow their parents' aspirations, change majors, find their own space in the world. The body work then brings more insight into locating one's centre, and the final sharing can provide new ideas and direction from that insight.

Furthering the connection with one's own needs through the body comes as an extension of the previous topics. We introduce relaxation and meditative activity with attention drawn to the body, then deepen the message from the unconscious by drawing our bodies and instructing the participants to draw what they feel their needs are into the drawn body.

As a more practical session, we intro-

duce the topic of time management and the circadian circle. It is important to note that we do not offer any ready-made time-management solutions; instead, we offer the participants the possibility to gain insight into their organization of time based on an immersive drawing of their daily activities. Also, we connect this topic with the biosynthetic concept of pulsation (Večeřová Procházková 2020), in this case between activity and rest, thus suggesting tuning into one's natural biological rhythms. This session also breaks the descent into the unconscious, which we find helpful, as Biosynthesis is not a cathartic method and we rely on the client's ego functions to integrate the experiences. This activity also brings more grounding after the previous exploratory sessions. Adolescence is an age of experiments and finding one's limits, which is surely conducive to one's development. However, in our group, we emphasize the grounding function just as much as the discovering as it can help to integrate the discovered experience and thus prevent being overwhelmed by it.

Next, we explore the limits themselves, how we perceive our own space, be it psychological or physical, and how we define and defend these limits. Again, this is incorporated with body work and conceptualized by drawing and open discussion.

In the last 3-4 sessions, we bring the participants and their experience of selfself exploration into self-other connecti-



Figure 1. Participants' feedback analysis result

on. We usually invite them to work in pairs and employ the cognitive functions more than before. This is the part where we might work with photos (e.g. based on the ideas of PhotoTherapy (Weiser, 1999) or share strengths in pairs through completing sentences such as "I'm very successful at ...".

These topics are not set in stone, and we allow ourselves some flexibility if the group requires it or when we ourselves want to try something new. Also, during the course of the seven groups, we gained more sensitivity to the group process and needs and adjusted the programme accordingly. This was mostly through slowing the pace down, giving more time for discussion and for integration, and being more open to requests from the group. We might, for example, omit the main exercise if the group discussion proves exceptionally fruitful, or conversely, do more grounding before the main exercise if the discussion seems stale due to some fear present in the group field.

Gains and challenges

Feedback from the evaluation

There were five questions in the questionnaire; "How did the group fulfil your expectations?", "How suitable was the structure, content and leadership style for you?", "Would you like to have changed something about the group and, if so, what?" and "What did you gain from the group for your life? What meaning did the group have for you?".

The five categories formed by coding the responses were: organization, programme, group, leadership and effect. Next, we will summarize our findings and discuss the possible future adjustment of the group. We separated the responses into those from students and employees and list the individual group data in parentheses; **total (students, employees)**. The perception score was the result of subtracting the negative responses from the positive ones. We present individual category scores and total mentions per category in graph form in Figure 1.

Organization was mainly concerned with the time, place, length of the sessions, number of meetings, unclear advertising for the group, not providing study materials. This category got 30 (14, 16) mentions and was perceived negatively overall (-22 (-8, -14)). Some of these complaints about time and space are unavoidable, but we will work on setting clearer expectations in advertising and are thinking about providing the participants with study materials or paper forms that they could fill in with their own thoughts and experiences.

The **programme** was perceived in the most positive way overall and was also the most mentioned; 70 (42, 28) mentions and a score of 42 (28, 14). The most praised were the exercises, the sharing and the discussion topics. Some suggestions

for improvement were: giving homework, going more in depth with the theory, giving more feedback, having more dancing or relaxation. These were so few that we will stick to the programme that was enjoyed by most and will maybe ask for requests periodically to find out if anyone's needs remain unmet.

The **group** was mentioned more by the students (12 (11, 1)) and was seen as slightly positive by the students and neutral-negative by the employees (8 (9, -1)). Our perception was in accord with the feedback, that the students usually formed a closer-knit group more readily than the two groups of employees. This might be due to age and also circumstantial difference; the employees work in an academic environment and maybe do not fluctuate so much in terms of their relationships in their middle age. More recently, we have put more emphasis on creating group cohesion and we find it easier when we have in-person meetings.

Leadership was slightly controversial; 35 (22, 13) mentions with a slightly positive score of 15 (6, 9). What was praised was our playfulness, upholding the structure, respect, and empathy, but there were complaints that we did not share more of ourselves and made mistakes in group interaction moderation, requesting that someone talked when they did not want to. Conflicts and incidents such as this do happen, although very rarely, in most groups. On the one hand, we see it as an opportunity for us to grow, thanks to our mistakes, and also show the group that mistakes can happen and can be used progressively, while staying sensitive to the possible damage done. Over the course of the two years, we have become more comfortable with sharing more, being more open towards the group, while at the same time upholding the rules in order to continuously provide a safe environment.

The **effect** was frequently mentioned and was overwhelmingly positive; 42 (19, 23) mentions and a score of 40 (19, 21). There was only one ill effect mentioned, which we do not disclose due to sampling size and maintaining confidentiality. The positive effects were affective (good mood, feeling safe, being calmer, relaxed), cognitive (knowledge of self) and conative (self-care, having time for myself).

Reflection of the team

Based on our internal discussions with regard to challenges, we found several topics to be crucial.

Group dynamics

Though we state that we do not work explicitly with group dynamics, we are fully aware that these dynamics exist. Our intention is to temper them as much as possible through the rule of talking into the circle and for the sake of one's own experience instead of speaking to another specific participant, or telling the group "universal truths". However, in some situations, we were unable to enforce the rule effectively, and spontaneous dialogues between participants tended to arise. This occurred especially in the courses with several people with borderline or narcissistic tendencies who actively accelerated the dynamics or with participants with autistic spectrum disorders who could have difficulties understanding the concept of the group (see below). In such situations, we tried to frame these dialogues in person-centred terms, indicating that different participants may have different experiences and views.

We were not always successful in managing the dynamics in this way. In one situation, a participant was disappointed with our way of leading and was silent in the final "check-out" circle. As the silence was felt very heavily by the group and raised possible questions, we decided to ask the participant if they wanted to make at least some general comment on the situation, after which they told us about their disappointment. After the course had finished, we saw in the evaluation that this step was perceived by another participant as us not respecting the "STOP rule".

As we stated above, our intention was not to use dynamics as a tool for therapeutic or self-developmental purposes, as would be the case in group psychotherapy. Rather, we reflected on it during the debriefing after the sessions within the team, or sometimes with our supervisor, with the intention of recognizing when we as facilitators might have been driven by phenomena emerging from the dynamics. This reflection helped us to be more grounded during the sessions and, we hope, to make the group as safe for all participants as possible.

Online vs live sessions

Sometimes, it was difficult to maintain good contact with the participants in the online sessions. Some participants did not have a safe space at home for themselves, and their relatives or roommates came into the frame, possibly hearing what was said and bringing in an element of insecurity. This was in violation of the safe and private space requirement we set for the online group.

Some participants had difficulties with the internet connection or were unable to have their camera on all the time, which was frustrating for the other participants and us as it created the impression of someone constantly leaving and reentering the shared space.

Once, a participant fell asleep during relaxation, and we were unable to wake him. After this occurrence, we introduced a new rule that it was their responsibility to take care of themselves in these situations and that the session could end with them still being asleep. For these reasons, we would make the rules for attending the group even more explicit and state them to every applicant as a condition of joining the group in order to minimize these disturbing situations.

On the whole, however, the students were grateful for the possibility of having the sessions at least online during the quarantine when their mental health was heavily challenged, and any kind of contact and psychological help was very welcome.

Once the live sessions were possible, we realized that many things worked differently. Even though we were surprised during the online sessions that body work could be effectively included at all, it was, understandably, much more powerful in the live sessions. The rewarding feeling when things went well was also more intense. On the other hand, live sessions enabled the group dynamics to emerge with more nuance. Having said that, we can conclude that we experienced the most dismissive attitude towards. us as lecturers during one online course in which one participant acted as if he wanted to take over the facilitation of the course.

The limits of diversity

Although we were open to the inclusion of students with more severe psychiatric or neurodevelopmental conditions, we have come to the conclusion that this openness has its limits. In one group, we had two participants with autistic spectrum disorders together with someone with borderline tendencies and also somebody with narcissistic, manipulative tendencies toward us, and it was very difficult to keep this group together in a safe space. Nevertheless, we were able to work around this limitation with the help of supervision.

Successively, several people with autistic spectrum disorders took part in the group. It turned out to be difficult for them to understand the body-work exercises. It could be hypothesized that the metaphorical part of the body work (e.g., my back aches from having the world on my shoulders) was unclear or that the mind-body connection was not explored enough beforehand due to the tendency for rationalization in people with autistic spectrum disorders. Also, their interactions with other group participants were awkward at times, especially in the first sessions. On the other hand, we also had a good experience with a person who was on the autistic spectrum but was very motivated and gained a lot from the group, especially in terms of meeting others and gaining insight into some of his maladaptive behavioural patterns. On the whole, we can conclude that through acceptance of their specific interpersonal styles, we fostered tolerance for otherness and destigmatization within the group, which is much needed

in Czech society due to historically low tolerance of difference under totalitarian rule.

The employees' group

We conducted one online and one live group. Generally speaking, the employees were very motivated by the work as many of them were very close to burning out due to the enormous workload, especially during the covid period. There was only one participant in the first (online) course who explicitly expressed being dissatisfied. The participant expected a more somatic approach and was disappointed by the psychological part, which he considered too "popularizing", and he had expected a more academic approach.

The Ukrainian group

The group for the Ukrainian students was not so successful. Originally, eight people applied, six came to the first meeting and the number declined steadily until no one came to the final meeting. While those who participated seemed engaged, it was clear that there was some kind of gap between them and us. Because no one completed the evaluation form, we were left to speculate on how to understand the situation. Possible explanations include: 1. They were not yet prepared to talk about the ongoing war; 2. There was a cultural gap and they were not used to talking about their inner feelings and working with the body or were used to a different way of expressing themselves; 3. We did not recognize their needs.

Conclusion

Our main aim was to present our experience of leading a biosynthetic experiential group in the context of university students. Our original intention was not to conduct a piece of research, and thus all the conclusions presented here are of a preliminary character as they are based solely on the final feedback of the participants and our own subjective experience and reflection on it. The feedback is selective and thus subject to all kinds of biases - even though some markedly negative responses appeared, we suppose that most of such possible responses remained unexpressed. Also, as the authors of the article, we cannot be neutral as we were the facilitators of the group.

However preliminary they may be, our conclusions are that this kind of group enables the participants to make considerable gains in a relatively short time, in many cases going far beyond their expectations. Specifically, we came to the conclusion that this kind of group is profitable for students without any specific needs as well as for those with quite severe conditions, including those with (compensated) psychotic illness, borderline personality disorder, autistic spectrum disorders etc. There remain some important challenges, such as clear presentation and organization, transparent leading of the group, ensuring the safety rules, and careful reflection on the group dynamics. The question of the suitability of this group for students from Ukraine remains open – if we would like to continue offering it, we would need to change the concept considerably and adjust it to their specific needs, which would probably demand some preliminary needs assessment.

We believe that through the experiential part of the sessions and through the writing and drawing techniques, these gains can last longer. However, more rigorous methods, including a followup study, would be needed in order to provide evidence for such a statement. Generally, including some quantitative measurements, for example, of the health-related quality of life, might be useful to get more rigorous insight into the efficacy of this kind of group. A thorough qualitative inquiry by a neutral researcher could also bring useful insights into questions such as what elements have therapeutic and insightful effects, what accelerates the group dynamics and if there are some hidden unmet needs of the participants.

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