Facebook as "Social Fact"

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Facebook is idea and reality; I use Durkheim's concept of social fact to clarify my experience of being witness to its influence on the feelings, thinking, and behavior of the members of a psychotherapy group. As social fact, Facebook informed and organized broad and diverse areas of the group: introducing a new idiom, altering boundaries of time and location, reducing confidentiality, and abrogating anonymity. Facebook operated as revolutionary infiltrator, nuclear idea, force of cohesion and coherence, and an inevitable enactment that enveloped us all. I could submit or rebel against Facebook's social impact or surrender creatively and retain faith in the members of the group and in myself.

KEYWORDS: Group psychotherapy; Facebook; social fact; emotional truth; nuclear idea.

Facebook is idea and reality; in this article, I use Durkheim's (1982) concept of social fact to clarify my experience of being witness to its influence on the feelings, thinking, and behavior of the members of a psychotherapy group. In leading the group, I monitored, evaluated, and responded to Facebook's revolutionary effects, striving to uncover and explore Facebook's symbolic value, the truth needs that it addressed, and the purposes it served.

Many forms of interpersonal behaviors—including those involved in psychotherapy and in group organization and process—may be conceptualized as a series of moves and countermoves to express, redirect, modify, or block the search for emotional truth (Billow, 2010a). In revolution, assumptions regarding how such truth should be pursued are challenged and so bring a group to a new phase. Revolution is thus both a mental attitude and a strategy of social action, modifying certain principles and modes of operation.

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As with the occurrences in the group I shall describe, revolutionary transformations may not always be immediate or obvious or result from a single or dramatic event. Revolution may arise organically, as part of the group’s development, or be imported in response to economic, political, or, as in our group, technological contingencies. Only in retrospect might the speed and significance of revolution become apparent. The cultural change may be positive and negative, progressive but problematic, and with its own set of unintended consequences that need to be understood and attended to.

**CLINICAL VIGNETTE**

This long-term psychotherapy group consists of 10 men and women between ages 45 and 62. This is how we might begin:

**ROBIN,** smiling, **to Donny:** You’re an idiot! You take up so much space.

**DONNY:** You’re so aggressive! No one tells you to look.

**ROBIN:** I have to scroll through to see my other posts.

**DONNY:** Your “other posts.” Your wall is five times larger than mine. How do you have time for anything else?

**ROBIN:** I’m interested in other people. Novel concept?

**DONNY:** Interest or gossip? You showed your boyfriend my page.

**ROBIN:** But you friended him.

**PAUL:** Donny is an egomaniac, that’s all. He needs a lot of attention, from anybody, he doesn’t care who.

**DONNY:** I have a following. They expect a cartoon and thought of the day. It’s my job to entertain and keep them happy.

**ELEANOR:** Some of the ideas are very good. It must take a lot of work.

**DONNY:** It does. And some of them are my own, from group.

**ROBIN:** You show pictures of yourself wearing a tuxedo. *sarcastic* That keeps people happy?

**DONNY:** The women check me out. They tell me they like a man to look sharp.

It helps my social life.

**ELEANOR:** You don’t need help, a lot of women like you, especially when you are being yourself. I do.

**ROBIN, to Donny:** Listen to her. I feel the same way.

**MARK:** He doesn’t believe it yet, he doesn’t trust women since his wife left him.

**DONNY:** Maybe never, except the women here.

**PAUL:** He’s doing it again, getting a lot of attention, dominating the group.

**DONNY:** Are you jealous?

**PAUL:** No, well, maybe I am. Where did you go all dressed up? Robin answers for him, naming a well-known and expensive restaurant.
MARK, to Paul: Do you want to be his date? You’re so into Donny and what he does and where he goes.

ELEANOR, protectively: Paul looks to Donny as a role model.

PAUL: I guess I do, he’s a chick magnet.

MARK, pursuing his implication: Could you handle the chicks?

PAUL: Probably not. I’m not sure how “into” them I am.

Some members—the speakers, others, maybe me—might stay with the repartee and reflect and deepen meaning. Or someone might indignantly implore intervention—“here we go again”—or exclaim, “I need to talk about something.” The disapproval or expression of need usually moves us to other subjects. I’m comfortable either way and remain relaxed. Symbolic meanings underlying resistances do not immediately or easily reveal themselves, and problematic character traits and behavior benefit from repeated confrontation (Billow, 2011). What members were saying to and observing about each other and themselves represented difficult emotional truth, which would be heard again, played with, and interpreted from multiple perspectives—contextualized and recontextualized in the course of group life.

During a session that followed this not untypical start, one or more of us might return to topics directly or indirectly referenced in the byplay such as Robin’s “aggressiveness,” Donny’s insecurity and distrust of women, Paul’s transference and/or possible sexual feelings toward Donny, Eleanor’s earnest protectiveness toward Paul and others, and so forth. Even the byplay itself—referenced by the exasperated “here we go again”—has segued into group self-exploration: Why would certain members spend so much time “gossiping” and others spectating?

FACEBOOK AS SOCIAL FACT

A prime constituent energizing and informing this productive group process joined without my invitation and remains without my choice. This infiltrator revolutionized the culture and structure of our group and affected the content of our discourse. Within a few months, a new idiom (Bollas, 1989) had been introduced and established, altering boundaries of time and location, reducing confidentiality, and abrogating anonymity. Facebook entered as social fact (Durkheim, 1982). No one had asked for my opinion or consent.

Durkheim held that our identities and behavior as individuals, groups, and societies are best studied and explained by reference to forces outside of and beyond

2 Epstein (2011) provides an interesting clue: “‘The version of ourselves we present to the world,’ wrote the English writer William Donaldson . . . ‘bears no resemblance to the truth. If we knew the truth about each other, we could take not one seriously. There isn’t one of us could afford to get caught. That’s all life is. Trying not to be found out.’ Gossip, of course, tries to find out” (p. 62).
the individual. Exterior and more powerful than any person, the social fact exercises a degree of coercive social force. It informs and organizes broad and diverse institutions and practice: legal, economic, religious, aesthetic (Edgar, 2002; Mauss, 1990)—and, as I am suggesting, therapeutic.

I could have attempted to preserve the therapeutic “frame” (Langs, 1978) by issuing the traditional injunctions against extragroup contact and insisting on adherence to the strictures of anonymity and confidentiality. But given the reality of the social fact, a diplomatic strategy of prohibition would have represented an effort to deny a cultural force greater than myself. In attempting to quash the revolution via the assertion of autocratic control, could I have succeeded in depriving these mature adults of Internet freedom to see and be seen?

Besides, I respected the decision-making skills of the members and their capacity to address and correct undesirable choices. Sanctions and prohibitions both are enactments, impacting and impacted by leader-member relations, the group’s development, and the here-and-now process. I attempted to offer neither.

Rather than submit to or rebel against Facebook’s social impact, I surrendered creatively (Ghent, 1990), retaining faith in the drive for emotional truth and mental growth that exists in all of us. I could wait to see where Facebook would take my thinking; what I would observe and come to understand about the group, its members, and myself; and what, if anything, I needed to do as leader.

As social fact, Facebook emerged in contemporary society because of the shared belief that its material existence serves important purposes. I had confidence that whatever materialized enactively involving Facebook could be utilized to discover these purposes, to bring meaning to the group experience and personal significance to each individual.

Still, leadership was required to guide the group through its cross currents of multiple needs such that Facebook, and how the group used it, received suitable psychological attention, without demanding too little or too much of our focus. The New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman (2011) recently opined,

In the hyper connected world, in the age of Facebook and Twitter, the people are more empowered and a lot more innovation and ideas will come from the bottom up, not just the top down. That’s a good thing—in theory. But at the end of the day . . . someone needs to meld these ideas into a vision of how to move forward, sculpt them into policies that can make a difference in peoples’ lives and then build a majority to deliver on them. Those are called leaders. (p. A 35)

The Facebook revolution rose bottom up from the members out of the nucleus of the group experience, itself nestled within the larger context of a changing culture. However, it was up to me, as leader, to gather latent and manifest themes and to employ Facebook—at least in my thinking—as a nuclear idea.

3 Diplomacy describes one of the four modes of therapeutic interaction; the others are integrity, sincerity, and authenticity (Billow, 2010b).
FACEBOOK AS NUCLEAR IDEA

A nuclear idea develops out of the nucleus of the group process: from intersubjective forces and locations that cannot be fully specified yet that may be possible to observe, name, and utilize clinically. As concept and technique, the nuclear idea supplements the whole-group, interpersonal, and intrapsychic lenses through which the therapist comes to understand group process and base interventions (Billow, in press).

The nuclear idea harnesses powerful and potentially destabilizing emotional material, but with the intention to be used for peaceful purposes, rational and productive. In introducing nuclear ideas into the group, the leader or member's intention is to stimulate thinking—as an emotional experience—and secondarily, if at all, to propel or quell action.

A nuclear idea may arise from any source that captures attention and that becomes developed mentally and in language. It may emerge from the leader or a member's thought and verbalizations, or as in this clinical example, from a series of group interchanges. Not infrequently, Facebook initiated group discourse, captured attention, and stirred controversy. It operated as a material entity and as a complex symbol, utilized in affectively intense group exchanges. It thus possessed the essential features to form a nuclear idea: experiential, symbolic, and affective, bearing on the here-and-now therapeutic process.

Facebook served many functions in the group: as a ritual commencing a session, an initiation ceremony involving new members, a mode of bonding, and a vehicle through which to present interpersonal agendas and deal with unfinished group and extragroup business. While I was struck with the potential of Facebook as nuclear idea, none in the group expressed interest or willingness to spend time thinking metapsychologically about Facebook.

Facebook asserted and reasserted itself as an ongoing theme of group interaction. For me it became a nuclear idea, as I thought about the implications to group structure and functioning and Facebook's symbolic and affective relevance to the psychology of certain group members and subgroups. But the group members were content to keep Facebook as a medium for their meetings without further overt thought.

The nuclear idea has to catch on, that is, to function in dynamic relationship with thinking such as to involve the group in an emotional experience associated with

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4 Bion's (1963) concept of the psychoanalytic object, with its extensions in “sense, myth, and passion,” provided inspiration; however, my application is Foulkesian (1964) and group relational. For Bion, it was the analyst alone who could “intuit” the psychoanalytic object, and the analyst had to maximize the conditions to capture the patient's attention, establish a shared focus, invite symbolic thinking, and, eventually, integrate within an interpretation. I conceive of the nuclear idea as arising from the indeterminacy of the communication within the dynamic matrix of the group and “co-created” as it develops and is expressed in the group’s “idiom” (Bollas, 1989), its particular language, symbolization, and enaction. Nuclear ideas are likely emerge from a member's thought and verbalizations, or from a series of group interchanges, and the therapist often functions as beneficiary of and contributor to the group's culture of collaborative thinking and articulation.
learning. Its value may be brief, as the idea becomes absorbed in the individual's and group's development. Or its influence may be long-lasting, an idea revisited on different levels of awareness that continues to propel emotional thought, function as a symbolic and affective narrative, and impact behavior.

The frequency with which nuclear ideas are explicitly made the focus of group investigation varies according to the type, stage, and process of a group and the membership composition. That which may potentially be treated and developed as a nuclear idea may not seem to interest particular members, or involve all members equally, or be the optimal in significance to the group and its process. Nuclear ideas differ in depth, creativity, and relevance to group and in the particular needs and wants of the individual members.

I would have preferred, and would still prefer, to have the members discuss Facebook as nuclear idea, to make explicit and explore some of the purposes it serves, in fantasy and in the intersubjective context of our group. But for them, the revolution was over and was not a source of intrapsychic interest or public debate. Facebook seemed merely an enjoyable convenience, common and of no more symbolic significance than a cell phone.

Not to say that everyone in the group had a Facebook page (and the group did not create its own Facebook page), but all were familiar with its use, and they also frequently communicated with each other via e-mailing and texting, except for me. I confine professional Internet exchanges to the occasional making or changing of an appointment and have limited familiarity with Facebook usage.

I remain Face(book)less, the outlier, taken care of and also derogated. Members patiently explain some of the electronic options regarding seeing and being seen, at the same time gently deriding me for my ignorance. As the mythic parent who does not "get it," I am tolerated, perhaps even cherished, for my perceived limitations. My disadvantaged status serves as an intimacy equalizer, too, reducing therapist–patient asymmetry, because among themselves, the members have sources of information and private relationships in which I do not participate. Facebook participation serves as an equalizer also between those individuals who also see me individually and those who are solely in group; they bond over my handicap in cyberspace.

However, relative naïveté put me at some emotional remove and provided impetus to study the ongoing enactments and the purposes served. As nuclear idea, Facebook gave me a productive way to self-reflect: to think about group, organize my mixed emotional responses, and measure my interventions. The nuclear idea allowed me to settle down, to be patient and enjoy its use in the members' narratives. I was free to follow my thoughts about Facebook, whether or not other members wanted to follow theirs. Over time, I could assess and evaluate its impact on group cohesion and coherence, the latter referring to organizing principles that enable higher levels of functioning (Ezquerro, 2010).5

5 I have argued that the psychology of the leader functions as an ongoing determinant of group process (Billow, 2003, 2010a). The question remains what happens when a focus of attention
FACEBOOK FOSTERS COHESION AND COHERENCE

The group treats Facebook as a precious “gift” (see Mauss, 1922/1990), a welcoming offering, an effective tool in maturational rites of passage, a joyful proclamation of life, a buttress in illness, and a memorial in death.

I marvel at the ease and speed with which members come to conform to the group’s Facebook norms. For example, after an extended period of individual treatment and my persuasive efforts, Eleanor entered the group unconfident and, in her words, “paranoid”: “I didn’t want even to let you [other members] know my last name, but now [after seven months] I don’t care. I mean I like to be able to see what’s going on, to contact you if I want to. Like now that I am worried about Seth [absent, recently diagnosed with a skin disease].”

Avid users metaphorically walked the Internet-shy Phyllis to dating sites, teaching her to electronically groom her Facebook self-presentation and negotiate with potential suitors. Facebook provided a scrapbook of Phyllis’s and the group’s collective accomplishments. Via her postings and discourse relating to her postings, Phyllis shared the victories of late marriage and pregnancy. Like proud grandparents, members expressed delight in her “wall” of baby pictures.

When Mark’s sister unexpectedly died, group members who could not or chose not to attend in actuality electronically participated in Shiva, the Jewish postfuneral ceremony. Mark’s Facebook postings connected the members not only to the deceased relative but to Mark himself such that mourning became a sustaining group event.

Facebook invites graphic entry into the user’s life: introducing the group to a self-selected collection of historic and contemporary characters, including the member, in the pose of mate, parent, pal, child, vacationer, athlete, host, victor, and so forth. Assuredly, the group does not take Facebook at face value.

In the vignette presented earlier, Donny’s Facebook images were subject to truth inspection, loving and helpful, although not administered in the most polite language or tone. “Idiot . . . egomaniac . . . needs a lot of attention from anybody . . . wearing a tuxedo keeps people happy? . . . You don’t need help . . . when you are being yourself.” Paul attempted to convince himself (with Eleanor’s collusive suggestion) that Donny’s images served as a heterosexual role model, but Paul accepted Mark’s more likely and ambiguous truth of his being “into” Donny, the man.

On other occasions, the group examined Robin’s “aggressive” usage of Facebook, such as in breaking the expanded group boundaries by inviting her boyfriend to view Donny’s page. That led to a reconsideration of the unstated rules of Facebook use and related topics involving extragroup socialization, trust, confidentiality, and two subgroups of Facebook posters versus those who merely observe.

Thus, while the group members would not treat Facebook itself as an explicit...
nuclear idea, it serves as the vehicle for the expression and development of other nuclear ideas. The free-flowing discussions stimulated by Facebook reveal individual histories and confirmatory and disconfirmatory intersubjective data, stimulate confrontation and analysis of character and of interrelationships, and focus the group on itself as a nuclear idea. I consider it a meaning-generating gift of coherence to all of us members—Facebook users and onlookers alike.

FACEBOOK AS ENACTMENT

Members band together and enact *equivalences* such that the group—its organization, process, and symbolic content—becomes a microcosm of the social facts and the larger social context that embeds the group (Hopper, 2003a, 2003b). Equivalences serve multiple goals, including the desire to achieve control and mastery over feelings of personal and social helplessness and powerlessness.

In my opinion, all groups and all individuals attempt to deal with these issues and the ensuing pain of separateness, isolation, and loneliness. The Internet serves as medium to fulfill the myth (and basic assumption) of achieving union and, with union, full knowledge of self and other. Considered in this light, Facebook usage and the ongoing group dialogues involving Facebook may be appreciated as regressive–progressive efforts to communicate desire and fulfill need. Whereas the ongoing enactments are not an antidote to feelings of fragmentation and annihilation, they allow members to be part of something they create and make meaningful.

I should add that only one of my groups makes use of Facebook as an enactment. I believe this attests to the strength of an appealing and magnetic subgroup: Robin, Donny, and Paul; all three are extensive Facebook users. Hence, whereas Facebook represents a social fact, its impact on a psychotherapy group is partially dependent on receptivity of the local environment. Other groups draw from the "social unconscious" (Hopper, 2003a, 2003b) to make use of other symbolic vehicles to serve as enactments, which generate other nuclear ideas.

Facebook invites members to cross a threshold into a wider social context in which the users and visitors are empathically embraced: likewise, a well-functioning group. I sometimes think about and relate to our group as its own Facebook page, in which all are “friends.” In facing Facebook together, the group views its equivalence, views and re-views itself.

THE GROUP FACES ITS LEADER

Consensus and little debate existed that I tolerated but disapproved of most, if not all, Facebook proceedings. While this is true—traditional training and indoctrination are difficult to eradicate—it is also not true. I came to appreciate the gift of Facebook’s electronic imprint, which informed us all.

The members had wished to establish certain modifications, all of which involved
extragroup contact among the members. They had their own beliefs about how the
group should best be run, and this involved challenging certain prevailing rules and
practices of our profession. Rather than primarily directed to testing or overthrow-
ing my authority by violating and weakening boundaries, the goal of the Facebook-
inspired revolution was to expand boundaries and strengthen group bonding.

Indeed, although the boundaries and modes of communication have expanded
to include the computer, not so the group’s purpose or preferred mode of interaction.
I have retained my position in the hierarchy of status, power, and influence. My
therapeutic values—psychoanalytic, group relational, and otherwise—predominate.

The collective activities focused the participants on a single narrative line,
stimulating associations, memories, fantasies, and thoughts related to the group and
its participants. As a revolutionary infiltrator, social fact, nuclear idea, and enact-
ment, Facebook gave opportunity for new meaning and depth to experiences that
have occurred before and were ongoing in intrapsychic, group, and social relations.
Facebook-inspired dynamics created interest in and valorized attending to many
nuclear ideas such as the personalities of certain members, the relationship between
subgroupings of users and onlookers, and the predilections of the group leader.

In my surrender to Facebook’s social force, the members faced a leader in a
productive struggle less with a rebellious group than with my own way of thinking
and therapeutic mode of doing.

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