Lost in the matrix: Dialectical tensions in facilitating virtual video groups during COVID-19 pandemic

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A B S T R A C T

The research phenomenologically explored the experience of facilitating virtual video groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research questions addressed relational processes in virtual video groups, including emotional presence, interpersonal communication, and intimacy. Specifically, we asked how facilitators can intervene effectively to promote these processes in the virtual space, within the context of social distancing.

Semi-structured group interviews were held with 26 female group facilitators from various professional backgrounds during the first wave of COVID-19 in Israel in May 2020. Phenomenological analysis yielded five main themes addressing dialectical tensions that operate simultaneously in the virtual space, both enabling and hindering relational processes in virtual video groups: intimacy and intrusion in the domestic space; sharp transitions from presence to absence; fragmented processing despite abundant information; sterility and clarity in group communication; and the hyper-aware self – being a participant and an observer at the same time. Moving groups into a virtual sphere challenged the traditional role of facilitators, who struggled to create a safe space in an unstable virtual setting where the boundaries between personal and professional lives were reduced. Findings also point to the potential of the domestic space to promote closeness and intimacy and suggest the virtual space requires facilitators to embrace multiplicity as a state of mind when intervening. Facilitators must work with permeable boundaries between inner and outer group spaces, accept discontinuity as a basic property of the virtual, and acknowledge the limitations caused by multiple stimuli.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a tremendous effect on relationships in almost every aspect of social life, as people have found themselves refraining from physical touch, while enhancing virtual interactions. The pandemic and its accompanying social distancing have dramatically challenged group encounters in many settings, including therapeutic, academic, and work settings. Group facilitators not previously trained to facilitate groups virtually have had to change in-person group meetings to virtual ones.

This paper addresses the implications of the loss of face-to-face (FTF) interactions and their relocation to the virtual space. An overview of the literature revealed scant research on the topic of virtual groups. Some studies have explored related topics, such as individual video e-therapy (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2014), Internet-supported group therapy (Barak and Grohol, 2011), cyber groups (Weinberg, 2018), and virtual

teams (e.g., Gibbs, 2009; Dixon and Panteli, 2010). However, none of these studies directly examined the unique experience of facilitating virtual video groups in which participants and facilitators see themselves throughout the session. In our study, we addressed facilitators' experience of virtual video group interventions, given the importance of this kind of interaction throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research on virtual groups (e.g., Weinberg, 2018) and teams (e. g., Gibbs, 2009) points to the unique concurrency of cyberspace, in which people have parallel experiences of themselves alone and with others (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Schultze, 2010). The concurrency of the virtual space challenges group facilitators, as one of the key factors in group facilitation is the ability of the facilitator, in Yalom and Leszcz's (2020) words, to 'light up the process' in the 'here and now' of the group. This enables group members to explore themselves, the role they play in the group, and the way they are perceived by other group members.

We asked how group facilitators work in the 'here and now' of the group, given the concurrency of the virtual space and taking into consideration the context of social distancing occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we observed the subjective experiences of group facilitators, all of whom were facilitating groups in which the relationships between group members were a major element of the group's main task. Common examples of this kind of groups are therapeutic and support groups, T-groups in workplaces (e.g., leadership groups, team building processes), and training courses.

We phenomenologically explored the experience of facilitating groups in a virtual space, particularly via the Zoom platform, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel. The research participants were 26 group facilitators whom we divided into four focus groups; all had transitioned to virtual facilitation. The contribution of the study is two-fold. First, it maps and conceptualizes the experience of facilitating virtual groups in times of social distancing, while addressing the related challenges. Second, it suggests ways to handle these challenges by adopting a transcendental outlook (Gibbs, 2009) on operating in the virtual space, particularly the use of multiplicity (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984), to allow facilitators to intervene effectively in virtual groups.

In what follows, we present the theoretical foundations of the study, addressing previous research on virtual groups and online therapy. Next, we explain the study method. Then, we present the findings, observing main themes that emerged from our participants' comments on their experience of virtual group facilitation. Findings are discussed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. We offer some insights into the need for playfulness in this space and suggest possibilities for future research.

2. Literature review

Theorists define small groups as consisting of two or more people who share mutual representations of one another (Lewin, 1948; McGrath, 1984) and identify the shared space of the group as unique and exclusive (MacKenzie and Livesley, 1983). According to Foulkes (1965), the foundation of a group is the 'group matrix', an internal network of communication, wherein a group establishes its own entity, beyond its individual participants but shaped and reshaped by participants' perceptions and behaviors, often referred to as the group-as-a-whole (Hinshelwood, 2007).

The existence of the group-as-a-whole is generally hidden from sight; we know the whole through experience and participation (Stacey, 2000). In this sense, the whole is emergent, not the result of a prior design or revealing what already exists (Bortoft, 1985). The group matrix allows members to understand each other and to have a shared sense of what is happening in the group. Matrix, which comes from the Latin for womb, is an indication of closeness and intimacy created among group members based on an internal language and a unique intersubjective space that emerges from the experience of being together (Ahlin, 1985; Stacey, 2000).

Using an existential-humanistic perspective, Yalom and Leszcz (2020) highlight the importance of illuminating the 'here and now' in the group to grow members' awareness of the group-as-a-whole, thus resulting in greater presence and more authentic interactions. The phrase 'here and now' refers to the 'here' of the room and the 'now' of the immediate moment. According to Yalom (1980), presence is important to effective group work, as it plays a vital role in development of a safe and intimate group environment for members to observe themselves. Yalom and Leszcz (2020) argue that to develop intimacy, an individual needs to be able to see his or her own difficulties the moment they arise, thus suggesting the importance of 'here and now' for individual and collective growth in the group. In virtual groups, however, participants and facilitators do not share the same space, creating multiple contexts of 'here and now' in the group.

2.1. Presence and intimacy in virtual groups

Questions of presence, intimacy, and connection in virtual groups have been addressed in research on the psychology of cyber groups. One factor that affects how people interact in virtual groups is immediacy, that is, the extent to which group members experience themselves and others as they are in the moment (Ormont, 1992). In psychotherapy, an immediate encounter is needed to discover psychic truth, i.e., novel knowledge rather than distant, conceptual knowledge (Blass, 2011). However, in the virtual space, participants communicate in a mediated manner, creating gaps in time and space, thus affecting immediacy (Weinberg, 2018). Therefore, although an individual might have an immediate reaction to something, it may not synchronize with the immediate reaction of another group member, hindering the ability of the facilitator and the group to address processes in the 'here-and-now' as Yalom suggests.

Another factor that affects interactions in the virtual space is body language. In virtual groups, the body is completely removed, making it harder to assess others' emotions and leading group members to concentrate solely on content and tone in their attempts to interpret what others are thinking or feeling (Parks, 2020). The loss of cues and emotional information normally transferred in FTF interactions can lead to misinterpretation and conflict escalation (Holtz et al., 2020). Alternatively, it may lead to conflict avoidance which, in turn, harms the ability to develop group intimacy (MacKenzie and Livesley, 1983).

Finally, the experience of virtuality creates an experience of co-occurrence, in which people are together – but also alone – and this impacts the sense of intimacy in virtual groups (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Schultze, 2010). Interestingly, the literature reports mixed findings, pointing at the virtual space as both enabling and disabling a sense of intimacy (see: Lomanowska and Guitton, 2016), especially in a group setting (Walther, 1995).

Weinberg (2018) argues intimacy in virtual groups differs from the Buberian intimacy of I-YOU, or I-IT in FTF groups. Rather, an intimacy of we-ness results from a sense of togetherness, of being part of a community, and of a greater social consciousness. As Turkle (2011: 171) explains, it is 'intimacy without privacy, that reinvents the meaning of intimacy'. In this sense, intimacy and relationships created in the virtual space can cause great confusion between closeness and distance, particularly if we think of them in the same way as we interpret FTF relationships.

Another caveat of a virtual sense of intimacy is that it is influenced by a phantasmatic dimension, one that can build intimacy and at the same time threaten it (Weinberg, 2018). The fantasy of sameness is very strong in cyber groups, particularly anonymous ones, in which people can play with multiple self-representations and project their fantasies on others. Although virtual video groups are not anonymous, and people can see one another on the screen, there is still space to play with multiple representations of the one broadcast on the screen versus the one sitting at a desk at home, and this may yield greater potential for fantasies about the self to come into play.

2.2. Virtual groups – challenges and opportunities

The research on virtual groups has found some advantages for participants and facilitators, including greater accessibility and the ability to take advantage of multiline channels when working online, for example, having both text (chat) and talk (Barak and Grohol, 2011; Nadan et al., 2020). Scholars have found that in clinical practice, online therapy is no less efficient than face-to-face encounters (e.g., Barak and Grohol, 2011; Robinson and Serfaty, 2008). This positive effect was also found in group interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic (Shapira et al., 2021). However, some argue virtual group facilitation requires a different set of skills from FTF facilitation; for example, the absence of non-verbal cues and the lack of direct eye contact can lead to the loss of important information, resulting in misunderstandings (Barak, 2005).

Moreover, a virtual setting may damage the therapeutic relationship (Hertlein and Earl, 2019), and studies exploring the online experience of groups have pointed to limitations in spontaneity, inconsistencies in technology, and limited control of end-user site environments (Springer et al., 2020). The absence of physical interactions also hinders the ability to sense and process, thus preventing people from enhancing and deepening their communication (Bender and Dykeman, 2016). Finally, informal communication ('sideway talks') may be missing in online encounters, and its absence could harm authenticity (Blanchard, 2021; Nadan et al., 2020).

The research also suggests ways therapists and facilitators can address challenges posed by the virtual space. One is by paying close attention to facial gestures and postures (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2014; Weinberg, 2018). Another is to use virtuality as a means of reducing anxiety by allowing participants to play and fantasize with their representations (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2014; Dixon and Panteli, 2010). In her work on virtual teams, Gibbs (2009) suggests a transcendental approach, namely, the ability to hold dialectical tensions in check without choosing one over the other, leads to more effective virtual team work.

In light of the challenges and given the scarce literature, we examined facilitators' ability to facilitate relational processes, including communication, intimacy, and emotional presence, in virtual groups within the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic in Israel. The general lockdown prohibited going out to work (except for essential workers), and work was mostly done from home. At the same time, many people lost their jobs, and unemployment rates in Israel during the first wave were the second highest among OECD countries (Kawohl and Nordt, 2020). In addition to the immediate health and economic threats, studies worldwide have found the pandemic and lockdowns had an immediate effect on the mental health of the general population, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, psychological distress, and stress (e.g., Rossi et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2020).

Taking this unique context into consideration, we explored how the loss of human connection and the rushed relocation in a virtual space impacted relational processes in small groups. We also examined the possibility of creating and maintaining a group matrix (Foulkes, 1965). Specifically, we asked:

1. What are the consequences of the virtual space on facilitators' ability to work with the 'here and now'?
2. How is a group matrix created when participants do not share a physical space?
3. What are the effects of the discontinuous space and lack of exclusivity described by previous research on facilitators' attempts to promote relational processes in the group, including communication, emotional presence, and intimacy?

3. Methodology

We took a phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 1975), focusing on participants' subjective experience of facilitating groups in the virtual space, including listening closely to our participants' lived experiences. Qualitative inquiry, especially phenomenology, may help to understand social responses and human behavior during disruptive events such as COVID-19 (Teti et al., 2020).

3.1. Participants

Twenty-six group facilitators took part in the study. All participants were female, as only women volunteered to participate. All participants were new to the virtual platform, with little or no past virtual facilitation experience before COVID-19. All had transitioned to virtual facilitation as a result of the pandemic and were asked to address this experience in the study. Participants had various professional backgrounds and

facilitation experience (see Table 1 for details). Numbers are used to ensure participants' anonymity.

Participants were recruited via ads targeting various professional groups on social media, in different institutes, in organizations within the field of group facilitation, and via the researchers' own professional networks. We used purposeful sampling and intentionally targeted facilitators with at least two years of experience as facilitators, who had made the transition to virtual during the first wave of COVID-19 in Israel (starting in March 2020), and who had some experience with virtual facilitation when data were collected in May 2020. We also targeted those facilitating groups with inherently relational aspects.

Table 1
Research participants' characteristics.

Participant number	Group number	Number of years as group facilitator	Discipline	Main target audience
1	1	8	Social work	Supervision of professionals
2	1	4	Social work	Support groups
3	1	16	Education	Parental guidance
4	1	15	Education	Parental guidance
5	1	13	Education	Parental guidance, mediation, students
6	1	14	Education	Students
7	1	29	Education	Parental guidance, students
8	2	9	Social work	Support groups for addicts
9	2	10	Organizational consultant	Management and team development
10	2	3	Social work	Young adults
11	2	15	Psychology Organizational consultant	Academia, management, and team development
12	3	10	Social work	Adolescents and young adults
13	3	5	Organizational consultant	Training groups, team development
14	3	35	Social work, psychotherapy	Parental guidance
15	3	18	Social worker and personal coach	Mothers' and parents' circles
16	3	15	Family therapist	Therapy groups
17	3	15	Social work	Parental guidance
18	3	29	Family therapist	Parental and family guidance
19	3		Organizational consultant	Management and team building
20	4	5	Social work	Support groups, training groups
21	4	15	Education	Parents' guidance
22	4	5	psychotherapist	Mothers' circles
23	4	5	Social work	Support groups for people with special needs
24	4	40	Psychotherapist	Parental guidance, students
25	4	7	Organizational consultant	Management development, academic training
26	4	2	Educational consultant	Student guidance

3.2. Procedure

The study was carried out with the approval of the Human Subjects Research Committee of the first author's academic institute. Due to COVID-19, all group interviews were held on Zoom. Since we wanted not only to understand personal experience, but also to allow discussion to evolve within the group, we decided to conduct group interviews (Morgan, 1996). We ultimately held four group interviews. The interviews encouraged the production of more fully articulated accounts and initiated a process of collective meaning-making among participants.

In the invitation to participate in the study, participants were informed that the meetings were held for research purposes, and data would be used solely for those purposes. At the start of each group interview, participants were reminded of the research purposes and were asked to give their permission for us to record the meetings. We promised to ensure confidentiality throughout. If participants did not feel comfortable, they were allowed to leave at any stage of the group interview. Only one participant decided to leave a meeting, in this case, a few minutes after it had started. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriber.

The group interviews were semi-structured and lasted 1.5 h. After conducting four group interviews, we felt gathering more data would add no value to the theoretical category of the experience of virtual group facilitation during COVID-19 in Israel, and we ended data collection in accordance with the principle of theoretical saturation, according to which no additional issues or insights are emerging from the data, and all relevant conceptual categories have been identified and explored (Charmaz, 2008).

All group interviews were facilitated by two members of the research team, with the third researcher participating as an observer. The interviews started with a short introduction of the researchers, the presentation of the research purposes, and an ethical declaration. After all participants agreed to participate, they were invited to present themselves to the group and talk about their experience facilitating virtual groups. After all participants presented themselves, we said the following: 'Think about one of the groups you are currently facilitating virtually. If you are facilitating several groups simultaneously, concentrate on the most significant group for you. Try to think of an occurrence, a moment, or an interaction that happened in the group that you would like to share with the group'. If the topic did not come up naturally, participants were asked the following question towards the end of the interview: 'How do you perceive your role as facilitator in the virtual setting in comparison to a face-to-face group?' At the end of the interview, participants were asked: 'How do you conclude the discussion? Please share one insight that you take out of it'. After all participants answered the final question, they were thanked, and the meeting ended.

3.3. Analysis

Data were analyzed using Giorgi's (1975) phenomenological analysis of dominant themes in five stages: (1) reading the text without predisposition; (2) dividing the text into natural meaning units; (3) reading each unit according to the research question (e.g., 'How do facilitators experience relational processes in the virtual space?'); (4) delineating major themes from the interviews (each interview contained between three and five major themes); (5) collecting dominant themes across the interviews. We identified commonalities, so as to cluster units of relevant meaning into themes while preserving individual variations (Hycner, 1985). For example, descriptions of not receiving feedback and having a participant's video image turned off emerged as one theme (presence). Given our use of open coding as an inductive process (Sanders, 1982), we did not use a priori categories, although we did keep the research questions in mind. To identify general and unique themes for all group interviews, we shifted the process iteratively from data to existing theories and back to data (Hycner, 1985). A theme was considered dominant if at least four interviewees mentioned it (Shkedi, 2003). The five themes discussed in this article were selected from the dominant themes identified in the interviews. All data were systematically analyzed and organized using the Atlas.ti 8 program.

3.4. Validation

It is important to note that all three researchers are group facilitators (two are psychologists with an organizational background, and the third is a social worker). On the one hand, this gave us access to the professional community of group facilitators and ensured a greater understanding of their lived experience. Our similar background also allowed a basis for trust between researchers and participants. On the other hand, we were potentially biased by our personal experience. Therefore, we attempted to be aware of possible bias at all research stages.

During the interviews, we fostered participants' free expression of their experiences as virtual group facilitators to obtain a complex, nuanced, and multifaceted picture. We had a clear format for the interview which allowed participants to bring their own experience while minimizing our intervention and imposition of our own experience. In the data analysis, we did a close line-by-line reading of the data to yield a finely tuned understanding of our participants' lived experience (Tracy, 2010). We used peer debriefing and created an audit log to address transparency. The audit log consisted of detailed documentation prepared at all stages by three independent researchers. We practiced self-reflexivity through 'bracketing,' a practice wherein the researchers remain aware of their predispositions with respect to the data, resulting in a continuous adaptation of the emerging themes and data structure through repeated readings of the interview transcripts (Hycner, 1985). Finally, the credibility of research findings was established by investigator triangulation (Denzin and Giardina, 2009), with the three authors discussing discrepancies until consensus.

4. Results

Data analysis yielded five main themes describing dialectical tensions that operate simultaneously in the virtual space, both enabling and hindering relational processes in virtual video groups: intimacy and intrusion in the domestic space; sharp transitions from presence to absence; fragmented processing despite abundant information; sterility and clarity in group communication; and the hyper-aware self – being a participant and an observer at the same time (see Fig. 1).

4.1. Intimacy and intrusion in the domestic space

Since most people were working from home, the domestic space emerged as a major concern, creating a more intimate environment that was also experienced as more intrusive in participants' lives. Some facilitators described the domestic sphere as puzzling and questioned their ability to create a safe space for their groups. Participant #18 for example, said:

> There is something very permeable in the Zoom …. Yesterday one of my participants had said… that it is so difficult for her, the fact she is sitting inside her bedroom closet… [and] it is unpleasant for her to have the entire conversation from there… or people who log in with their children sitting in their laps.

Others pointed to new possibilities of non-verbal self-exposure and intimacy created by the domestic space. Participants #10 said: 'There are some (people) in this group I have known for almost four years, and I didn't know anything about them. I didn't see their houses… and now suddenly I see their partners, their friends.'

Given the context of social distancing and quarantine, some thought the virtual space allowed people to feel less lonely and gave them a sense of belonging. Participant #2 noted:
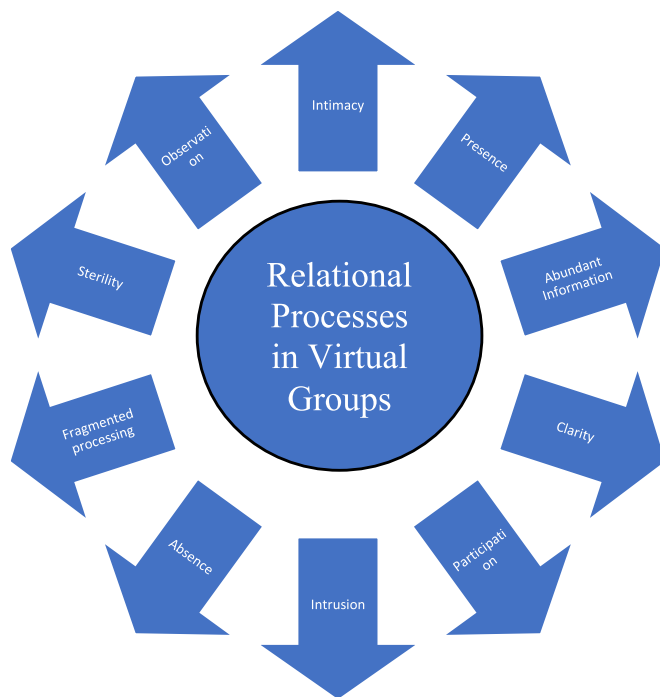
Fig. 1. Paradoxical tensions in facilitating relational processes in virtual video groups.

One of the group members I haven't met for a while…She was hospitalized after giving birth, and she and her baby both got sick with COVID. They were infected and were (still) allowed to (virtually) participate…. Think how lonely it must have been in a place like this, to be in a hospital after giving birth, nobody coming to visit… and… she belongs somewhere (referring to the group) which is very meaningful for her.

The disappearance of the physical meeting room and the entrance of the domestic environment created a situation in which themes generally in the background of the group discussion came to the fore. Participant #22, who facilitated groups for young mothers after giving birth, said the following:

The partners, whom the group members often talked about, were suddenly there… and sometimes women would ask if their partners can be a part of the conversation, when we discussed partnership after giving birth… My husband who is a doctor was shocked at first [when he started providing telehealth services to his patients in the pandemic]. How is it that people are entering our house and he enters theirs…? There is so much information that is coming into the group, without paying attention, just because we are in our homes.

Participant #22 reflected on the complexity created by the new intimate information that comes from entering the participants' houses, which can be experienced both as an intrusion and as enabling intimacy and better acquaintance.

4.2. Sharp transitions from presence to absence

The delicate processes of participants shifting from presence to absence in FTF groups become blunt in the virtual space, with a greater impact on the facilitation. Facilitators reported an experience of constant instability of presence and sudden shifts from presence to absence. Group members and facilitators could suddenly, either willingly or unwillingly, disappear from the group, without giving notice. Participant #11 commented, 'I feel there is something very fragile in the virtual presence… when a participant starts to flicker, to disappear …. It is very

much unsettling. It's always unsettling, you know, when participants come and go but in the virtual space it feels like ten times more'.

In addition to their fear of group members disappearing, facilitators reported feeling anxious about disappearing themselves. Participant #17 said: 'In my last meeting nobody arrived on time, and I sat in Zoom and looked at myself in the camera…. It's always unpleasant to sit in an empty room…but if (in FTF) I give myself rational explanations (for their absence)…here it felt different…I felt much lonelier'. The latter described her sense of loneliness as much greater than when she was facilitating FTF groups. Looking at herself on screen while waiting for the group may have exacerbated the experience. In FTF groups, she could rationalize participants' absence as 'being just late', but in the virtual space, the lack of presence and the hyper awareness of herself sitting alone signified the group's rejection. Others have similarly noted the influence of fantasies and fears in the virtual space (Weinberg, 2018).

The instability of the virtual presence was associated with other strong emotional reactions. Participant #1 said:

There is something really difficult, when someone who is there but turns off their camera…It is as if they are there but not there, I mean, you are either in (or) you are out. Not (only) for me, but also for the other participants…there is something almost aggressive about it.

Participant #1 said she experienced participation with a closed camera as an aggressive act. Her statement, 'you are either in or you are out', suggests a lack of tolerance of ambivalent presence that is created in this space.

4.3. Sensing the group: fragmented processing despite abundant information

Despite the abundance of information provided in a virtual setting, facilitators experienced the attempt to 'read' the group as both challenging and tiring. Participant #24 commented: 'It takes much more effort to feel the group. I really need to look at each set of eyes, and to try to figure out where they are at. When I'm sitting in the circle (referring to FTF group), I'm feeling it, I don't need to make an effort to identify it'. She described a fragmented process, not a holistic one. In FTF groups, she said, she can sit 'in the circle'; in other words, she is immersed in the group experience. Instead of experiencing the 'group as a whole' in the virtual space, she experiences it as a cluster of individuals.

Intervening effectively in group dynamics requires the processing of rich information. Although the virtual space holds plenty of information about participants – such as enlarged views of facial gestures, personal environment, and textual information in some cases – facilitators still struggled to read the group. One reason could be that they were not sharing a time and space. Participant #25 said the following:

I find myself finishing sessions feeling tired… with a feeling that I have taken in much more (information)…. I need to analyze more… looking and concentrating on each participant's background…. There is so much more information pouring in, and I need to figure out whether I take that into consideration.

According to the participant, trying to perceive information in a fragmented way required greater processing capacity: which information should she give her attention to? Her question points to the distracting potential of this kind of processing.

Facilitators had difficulty assessing the groups because of the loss of information derived from body language, atmosphere, or even smells, information usually perceived holistically in a FTF encounter, even if it is processed unconsciously. Participant #4 put it this way:

It makes it hard for me to sense the responses, are they satisfied, or not… I miss seeing body language, when I can actually see…in a group it is much easier for me to feel people, even on an energetic

level, sometimes you feel the stress… and now (facilitating virtually) I feel it is less transferrable, this issue.

In addition, the virtual space added a new dimension to processing textual information, one that rarely exists in FTF groups, as participant #4 noted:

> There was a moment in the group where I was so focused on watching and listening to people talk, I missed (the chat) that was running on the side… usually in groups there are explicit processes, and implicit processes, but here there are also written processes. It is like…another channel that you need to look at.

Paradoxically, the addition of another channel of information did not help her to read the group; instead, it resulted in loss of information, as it required her to make difficult decisions on what to pay attention to, while simultaneously trying to avoid distractions.

4.4. Sterility and clarity in group communication

Another central theme that emerged in the group interviews was that the virtual space may create clarity but it also sterilizes emerging processes in group communication. On the one hand, it seems that in the virtual setting, people interrupt one another less, which may deepen the group discussion, as participant #8 noted: 'I discovered that group meetings became better, with less noise and disruption to one another… we managed to engage in much deeper content on Zoom.' On the other hand, this unidimensional nature of the virtual space may hinder the ability of the group to engage in spontaneous, emerging processes of communication. For example, participant #17 struggled to approach a participant in her group who had recently lost his father:

> I wanted to say something to him, and I wasn't sure if that's the right thing for the group, or for him right now…. It was very awkward…. If we were meeting as usual (FTF) I would have approached him before starting the session and would have expressed my condolences…. (Eventually) I brought it into the group because I felt I cannot ignore it, even though it wasn't exactly right… and he didn't respond, I wasn't even sure if he had heard me… and then his Internet crashed…. It is supposedly a technical issue, but it's not.

Participant #17 was trying to decide how to approach a delicate situation, and all options felt wrong to her. She described it as 'awkward'. Because of the virtual space, she lacked subtle cues of communication which could have enabled better interpersonal contact. Moreover, there was no alternative informal space to accommodate the type of communication required.

Another example of the difficulty setting up good communication in the group was mentioned by participant #2:

> When all microphones are open, it creates a situation where every word or saying of a particular person can take over the conversation, and can cancel out someone else's. And it's a dilemma…. I haven't solved it yet. I once suggested that we would all mute our microphones in order to really talk, but felt it was harming the dynamics, and on the other hand, when all microphones are open it feels like everyone is cutting off each other's words.

Participant #2 said it was almost impossible to generate spontaneous talk in the virtual group, pointing to the non-technical implications of a technical issue.

Interestingly, some facilitators noted how the clarity and sterility of the virtual space affected participants differently. Participant #14 commented:

> There is a different dynamic in the virtual group. It isn't necessarily bad, there are also good sides to it. I noticed, for example, that in my group there are some women, who participate during virtual

meetings. They take up more space, put themselves 'in the fire'… while others (who are more dominant in FTF) disappear.

The comment suggests that while some group members may find the virtual environment safer and more comfortable, others might withdraw from discussions.

Facilitators also thought the sterile environment of the virtual space placed them in a more directive position, and the dynamics revolved around them. As participant #13 put it: 'I feel I sometimes need to be a virtuoso, to bring in a lot of methods, to pump up the discussion… because the regular dynamics that happen in the circle are missing…and I really empathize with the feeling of exhaustion after a session.' Neta used the term 'circle' for the FTF group; in fact, this is a basic property of an FTF group. Everyone can see everyone else, and this allows the group's matrix to form.

In another example, participant #15 said:

> When a meeting starts, I'm always there…. The meeting always starts when they see me, and only then they are joining in…. They don't have any other option…and today I had a problem with the zoom, and I logged in but I couldn't be seen…. Meanwhile they (participants) were talking amongst themselves…. It was very interesting, I suddenly saw that there is a dynamic (also) without me.

The latter described the virtual group space as existing only when the meeting starts and with the facilitator present; as such, it challenges group members' spontaneous and informal connections without the mediation of the facilitator. The unexpected disruption she experienced allowed group members to spontaneously engage in interactions with each other, something that rarely happens in virtual settings. Other facilitators similarly said they were being pushed into a directive position: they intervened more, tolerated fewer silences, and this, in turn, harmed the possibility of emergence in the group.

4.5. Hyper-aware self: observing and participating at the same time

The fifth and final theme was related to the existential experience of the virtual video group. The virtual experience underlined the existence of the group as a separate object, creating the facilitator's and the group members' hyper-awareness of themselves and of the group. In a virtual space, we are concurrently insiders and outsiders (Weinberg, 2018) and thus are unable to be 'immersed in the group experience', as one of our participants put it.

The experience of both participating and observing seemed to make facilitators much more aware of themselves and their conduct. Participant #1 commented:

> The fact that we see ourselves all the time…is both stunning and unbearable. I mean…we don't see ourselves (usually) when we are facilitating or teaching or providing psychotherapy and suddenly… this hyper-awareness to how we look like or…even to mimic, I mean, it is very difficult not to look.

Participant #1 described her hyper-self-awareness in virtual video groups as both 'stunning and unbearable', signifying the ambivalence invoked by this hyper-awareness. Despite her uncomfortable feelings, it was hard for her not to look when the option was there. Other facilitators similarly reported that they chose to view themselves, hinting that the mere possibility made it impossible not to do so.

The hyper-awareness of one's self-image triggered varied feelings among the facilitators. Participant #14, for example, noted:

> I'm really bothered by seeing myself now…in (FTF groups) I'm free to walk around, to laugh and to tell jokes…. I don't see myself, I forget…my age and my hair and how I look in general… (now) every time I see myself (on camera) I try to change my position, my hair, I'm very much preoccupied with that… the mirror reminds me.

Because she was aware of herself, she was not as free and sponta-neous as in FTF meetings. Participant #10 had a different experience: 'I feel that I'm undergoing a meaningful process of learning…. I haven't recorded myself yet…but I think I should do it, because it can give me many tools and skills to really see myself handling the group.' Unlike participant #14, participant #10 thought the experience of observing herself was an opportunity to learn and improve her facilitation skills. She expressed curiosity about this new hyper-awareness.

For the most part, the hyper-awareness of the self created an ambivalent experience, where confusion and embarrassment sat beside an opportunity to raise self-awareness and experiment with learning and playfulness. In this sense, the virtual world offered facilitators an op-portunity to play with the self and to create different versions of 'me'. This appeared in the way facilitators negotiated the backgrounds they chose to reveal in their group meetings, as demonstrated in the following discussion:

> Participant #8: In the group there are only men and I'm the only woman… they are curious about it (her home) so I felt a need to protect myself in order to feel comfortable.
> Participant #10: I also chose to sit in front of a blank wall at first… because of the power gap between me and the group members…but at a certain point they asked me to show my home… so I chose what to show them.
> Participant #9: I sit in front of a gray wall…and then somebody told me to hang pictures on it. But it is an artistic wall, it's a special texture, what do pictures have to do with it?
> Participant #3: I think it is very personal…. I feel much more natural to sit with my home office in the background, there are many things here that represent who I am…. I tried the virtual background and realized it is not for me.

In the discussion above, facilitators described their choices of back-ground in the context of how much they wished to reveal to others, what to hide and what to show, while wanting to remain authentic. The dis-cussion also reflected the vulnerability they felt, because their personal spaces were much more exposed. Admittedly, however, there was a difference between those who did not want to be seen and those who utilized self-exposure as part of their virtual persona.

5. Discussion

The transition to the virtual space necessitated by COVID-19 situated both group members and group facilitators in multiple positions of time and space, challenging facilitators' ability to intervene and to engage in relational processes in the 'here and now' in several ways. Yet it also created new possibilities. These findings suggest new skills and per-spectives are required by facilitators to promote relational processes in the virtual space (implications of our findings are summarized in Fig. 2).

Our findings revealed dialectic tensions between contradicting forces that both hinder and promote intimacy, emotional presence, and good communication between group members, coinciding with findings of previous research on the contradictory nature of the virtual space (e.g., Gibbs, 2009; Weinberg, 2018). In particular, we found relational pro-cesses in virtual groups were greatly affected by the multiplicity of contexts – group members were both together and alone, and in the particular context of COVID-19, with other family members. The pandemic and social isolation intensified contacts within the nuclear family and enmeshed professional life with personal life. This context amplified the complex reality of group members, who failed to separate themselves from the rest of their lives when entering the group. Deleuze and Guattari's (1984) concept of multiplicity suggests an incoherent identity, i.e., one with contradictions between different parts of the self, may enhance creativity and authenticity. Following Deleuze and Guat-teri, we could argue that given the permeable context of the virtual group, encouraging group members to bring their domestic contexts with them may enable them to be more present in the group. In this sense, the dominance of the domestic sphere may lead to a different kind of intimacy, one driven by participants' multiple life contexts. In Foulkes's (1965) terms, the group matrix in the virtual space is affected not only by the immediate level of communication created in the group, but also by the broader life contexts of the participants.

It appears that time and space challenged facilitators' ability to address processes happening at the level of the group-as-a-whole. Despite the abundant information provided to them on each group member, facilitators found it hard to provide holistic accounts of group processes, as the information was fragmented, and the group space was experienced as containing much more information than they could process. The difficulty of 'reading the group' suggests the level of the group-as-a-whole was emerging rather than known and was only perceived through experience and participation (Bortoft, 1985; Stacey,
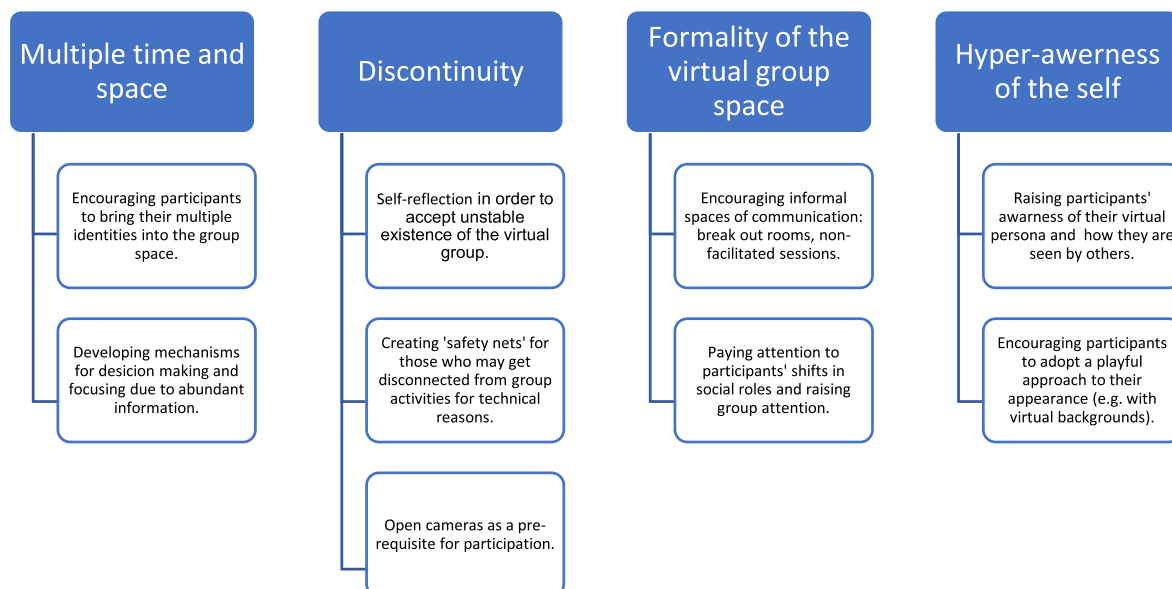

Fig. 2. Implications for facilitators of virtual video groups.

2000). This had an effect on facilitators' ability to raise consciousness of 'here and now' processes and hence on their ability to develop intimacy and closeness in a virtual group (Yalom and Leszcz, 2020). Facilitators mentioned the abundant data provided in the virtual space, including the dominance of textual information, something generally lacking in FTF groups. The literature has commented on the new information received in the virtual space (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2014), but there is a need for a more articulated mechanism of decision making that would help facilitators navigate the sea of information offered by the virtual group space and to use it effectively to promote relational processes.

Another element of the virtual space that affected relational processes was the sense of discontinuity (Dixon and Panteli, 2010). It intensified facilitators' insecurities and heightened their fears of losing the group. Sharp transitions between presence to absence, depicted in other descriptions of virtual group facilitation (e.g., Kaye-Tzadok, 2020), accompanied the facilitation experience and made some facilitators vulnerable to feelings of rejection by the group. The sense of an inconsistent presence in the virtual space highlighted the concurrency effect of being together and alone at the same time (Weinberg, 2018). Ambivalent cues, such as a closed camera and an inconsistent virtual presence, invoked feelings of doubt and insecurity among the facilitators we interviewed. The discontinuity of the virtual space could challenge facilitators' sense of safety and thus jeopardize their ability to help the group develop in a safe manner. It might also lead to feelings of guilt if they cannot provide this safety in the virtual sphere.

Facilitating groups virtually intensifies the dialectical challenge of being simultaneously present and absent from the group. These tensions exist in FTF groups as well (Smith and Berg, 1987), but virtual groups make facilitators more vulnerable, as their own existence in the group is unstable. The discontinuous nature of the virtual group space, in which participants exist in multiple realities, has been discussed in the literature as initiating strong ambivalent reactions (Gibbs, 2009; Dixon and Panteli, 2010). Gibbs's (2009) exploration of virtual teams found a useful way to deal with such tensions in the virtual space was to adopt transcendent strategies, embracing the ambiguity and confusion created by the dialectics of being together and apart, included and excluded. In this sense, group facilitators must be highly reflective, examining their own feelings and thoughts in order to accept the unstable existence of the virtual group.

Another interesting finding was that the relatively structured and formal way of communicating created in virtual video groups was experienced as enabling speaking but also as hindering emerging group discussions. Spontaneous communication and informal spaces facilitate emerging processes in groups (Stacey, 2000) and help establish intimacy (Parks, 2020). As noted by Nadan et al. (2020), their absence could harm authenticity. Facilitators had a suggestion that might help; they thought absence could be proactively addressed by dividing participants into breakout rooms in pairs, or letting them use the group space without facilitation, before or after the session. Yet it is important to note that structured discussions made some group members feel more comfortable while sharing and allowed more in-depth discussions for some groups.

Finally, in virtual video groups, participants see one another and themselves when participating. Facilitators indicated that this led to hyper-awareness of the self created by the camera and the constant observation of the group and of the self while participating. Again, facilitators found this feature as both enabling and hindering emotional presence and participation, for their group members and for themselves. On the one hand, hyper-self-awareness may diminish fantasies people may have about how they look. On the other hand, it could create new spaces for fantasies and playfulness with the new virtual persona, giving facilitators more opportunities to shape their virtual appearance. In this sense, the virtual video group required facilitators to be aware of themselves as performers, thus challenging the traditional role of the facilitator.

The ambivalent feelings created by self-observation could stem from confusion caused by the multiple self-representations available in the virtual space (Weinberg, 2018), where people observe and participate at the same time. This confusion echoes Derrida's ([1968]1982) idea of *différence*, whereby the delay in time created by the chain linking the real self to the represented self (and in this case, the virtual self) creates a difference between the physical existence and the virtual one. For the facilitators, 'me' and 'not me' were both broadcast on the screen. This suggests members of virtual groups experience themselves in parallel, in two different spaces of time and space, two versions of the self – similar, but not identical.

The transition to virtual facilitation challenged the facilitators we interviewed. It contested their traditional role and authority and intensified their vulnerability. In the virtual space, facilitators were in their own homes, facing all the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this sense, virtual facilitation under COVID-19 can be addressed as a type of shared trauma (Baum, 2010). In a shared trauma, clients and professionals in a therapeutic relationship cope with the same traumatic events, and therapeutic boundaries between personal and professional are blurred (Tosone and Bialkin, 2003). Our research reveals that a facilitator's task of creating a safe space in a permeable setting in the midst of a global, life-threatening pandemic was complex and challenging.

Going forward, it appears the ability to be present in the virtual space will require facilitators to embrace multiplicity as a state of mind. In particular, boundaries between the inner and outer group space must be renegotiated. Facilitators may have to accept discontinuity as a basic property of the virtual space and acknowledge their limited ability to negotiate it. At the same time, they may need to adopt a more playful approach to their virtual persona, viewing it as less constant. Taken together, these might allow group facilitation to be adapted to the fragmented nature of virtual space.

6. Limitations

The research was conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It gave us a rare opportunity to explore the experience of seasoned group facilitators taking their first steps in virtual facilitation. But at the same time, our ability to separate their experience of virtual facilitation from the context of a colossal crisis prohibiting social connections was limited. Although we kept the context of the pandemic and its effect on both facilitators and participants in mind while conducting the research, findings might differ in a different reality of social relations.

Although participants varied in their backgrounds, they all self-identified as females. The participation in the study was voluntary, and no men volunteered. Since women are the majority in therapeutic professions (such as social work, psychotherapy, and counselling), a majority of women in the sample was expected. Future research should strive to achieve a more varied sample of participants to assess possible gender biases in virtual facilitation.

In addition, we concentrated on the facilitators. It would be interesting to explore similarities and differences in the subjective experiences of group members and group facilitators. We assume findings on group members' experiences would yield a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenological experience of group dynamics in virtual settings.

7. Conclusions

In his essay 'The singularity distress', Yehuda Yisraeli (2013) describes the distress created by paradoxical situations. We sense the existence of another dimension, yet are not able to see it or give it a name. The singularity is perceived as threatening the old symbolic order, while revealing itself as a new symbolic order. In a similar way, the virtual group creates another dimension, challenging our fundamental concepts of group work.

Given our findings, we argue the discourse on groups must be extended to include the dimension of groups as they develop in the virtual context. One of the facilitators told us she is not the same facilitator she used to be, and if we were to talk to her again in a few months, she would probably be different again. The subjective experiences our facilitators shared pointed to the constant development of their professional abilities and understanding as facilitators. Clinging to old concepts belonging to the FTF world of group facilitation might hamper this type of development. 'An airplane is not a car with wings,' said one of our participants. In the same way, a virtual group is not a linear continuation of a FTF group. Only time will tell, but curiosity and re-examination of basic concepts seem necessary to create a connection between people in the multi-dimensional space of the virtual group.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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