



50 years and beyond  
group competency for  
a world in conflict

## How long have you been a member of IAGP?

My first encounter with IAGP was at the international IAGP conference in Mexico City in 1984. Since then, I have attended every triannual IAGP conferences up till now, and most of the regional conferences as well. I don't remember when I first became member of IAGP, but obviously I felt attracted to the organization from the very first encounter. I had started my group analytic training a few months before the Mexico conference, and in contrast to the rather strict and well-organized structure of the group analytic training, the IAGP conference with all its plurality and different approaches felt like a stimulating and vitalizing chaos. I spent a lot of time with exiled Argentinian psychodrama therapists, and we had a lot of fun. Later I became member of the Board of Directors of IAGP from 2000-2009 and from 2016-2022.

## How long have you been practicing as a group analyst?

I started my 5 years group analytic training in 1984, though I had worked with group psychotherapy in hospital settings years before that. I finished the training in 1989 and received my diploma in group analysis in 1990. Then I was training group analyst at the Norwegian training program in group analysis for 25 years, and I conducted analytic groups in my private practice all these years.



## Which theoretical approach is your primary one? Why do you feel closer to this approach?

I was trained as a psychodynamic/psychoanalytical individual psychotherapist before I started my group analytic training, so psychoanalytic theory has been my approach from the beginning, particularly later with integration of self-psychology and intersubjectivity. When I started my group analytic training, learning Foulkesian group analytic theory of human mind and how intertwined we as human beings are with each other, which added considerably to my understanding of human nature. So, group analysis is my way of doing therapeutic practice. Though I have attended many psychodrama workshops and events, I have never felt that psychodrama would be my method. May be the psychodrama acting does not fit with my personality?

***"No matter what kind of symptoms the patients present, there is an underlying longing for meaning, for being seen and understood, for connectedness to others, for valuable and meaningful relations."***

## How was your first encounter with group analysis?

I remember very well the first session in my group analytic training. It was a block training program with trainers from IGA, London. We were 48 trainees, experienced psychiatrists from all over Norway eager to learn how to practice group psychotherapy. We were divided in 4 small therapy groups. 12 curious and a bit anxious members of the group sitting in a circle. Then the group conductor started the session by saying: It is 9 o'clock. The session lasts till 10:30. Then she said nothing. A very long and painful silence followed, until we hesitantly started to talk. But slowly a group process developed, which over time became the most important therapeutic experience for all of us.



## IAGP Member of the Week Thor-Kristian Island, Norway

*Participated in the IAGP conference for the first time in Mexico City, 39 years ago.*

Thor-Kristian Island is a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and group analyst from Oslo, Norway. He is co-founder and previous director of Institute of Group Analysis (Norway). He was also co-founder of the Norwegian Group Psychotherapy Association (NGPF), where he is now honorary member. He has been training group analyst, supervisor and theory lecturer, as well as one of the large group conductors at the group analytic training program in Norway for more than 25 years.

He is honorary member of the European Group Analytic Training Institutions Network (EGATIN), and he has been member of the management committee of Group Analytic Society international (GASi). He was member of the Board of Directors of International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes (IAGP) from 2000-2009, and from 2016-2022. He was co-chair of the pre-congress at the IAGP congress in Cartagena, Colombia in 2012. He is editor of the IAGP Globeletter, and chair of the IAGP Fellowship Awards Committee. He has also been involved in the IAGP group psychotherapy training project in Ramallah, Palestine. He is current teacher and trainer at the Chinese-Norwegian advanced training program in psychoanalytic and group analytic psychotherapy in Beijing, China. He has been lecturer at numerous international congresses, and he has published papers on Large Groups and on group analytic training.

e-mail: [island@iga.no](mailto:island@iga.no)

# Coffee Break with Thor-Kristian Island



50 years and beyond  
group competency for  
a world in conflict

## What led you to pursue an interest in group analysis?

When I first started my group analytic training, I was interested in learning how to practice group psychotherapy better for my patients. Little did I know at that time that as a trainee, becoming a member of the group analytic training community, it would have a deep impact on my professional and personal identity. And that I later, as training group analyst and director of the Institute of Group Analysis, Norway would be so involved in the international group analytic and group psychotherapeutic professional community. A commitment that still lasts.

## What would you say have been the most significant developments within the field of group analysis since your interest in this area began?

I used to say that group analysis is not a religion that is protected by a priesthood of group analysts. It is a theory of mind and a therapeutic practice that is under continuous development. Since Foulkes developed his theories, we have new knowledge about the human mind. Within the Norwegian milieu prominent theorists and researchers have also contributed to the integration of psychology of the self, intersubjectivity, theories of emotions, mentalization and personality in modern group analysis.



## What would you say is the most rewarding and the most challenging aspect of the group analysis?

The most rewarding aspect of group analysis is to see how patients in deep pain and challenging lives can experience change and a better life through the process of the group. To see how they engage in each other, and help each other, to find the group as an arena for personal growth and better self-understanding. A patient in one of my groups said: "This group is the best education I ever had in my life" In addition to the many heart-warming experiences as clinical group analyst with patients, for me personally it has been very rewarding to be member of the training staff and director of IGA, Norway in building up strong and successful training programs in group analysis and group psychotherapy in Norway. Working in international group psychotherapy organizations has also had a strong impact on me professionally and personally.

***"We are experiencing difficult situations in the world, and it seems that the world is going in the wrong direction. There is less democracy, more authoritarian regimes, less freedom of speech, and less free and open dialogue, which is paramount in group analysis. Instead, we see more polarization, more black and white thinking, more "us vs. them". Efforts to silence and cancel the other's opinion. Less efforts and belief in a shared and common "WE".***

***In this situation I believe, it is more important than ever that we, as therapists, are able to contain, to process, and never to give up the belief in dialogue."***



## IAGP Member of the Week Thor-Kristian Island, Norway

*Participated in the IAGP conference for the first time in Mexico City, 39 years ago.*

Thor-Kristian Island is a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and group analyst from Oslo, Norway. He is co-founder and previous director of Institute of Group Analysis (Norway). He was also co-founder of the Norwegian Group Psychotherapy Association (NGPF), where he is now honorary member. He has been training group analyst, supervisor and theory lecturer, as well as one of the large group conductors at the group analytic training program in Norway for more than 25 years.

He is honorary member of the European Group Analytic Training Institutions Network (EGATIN), and he has been member of the management committee of Group Analytic Society international (GASI). He was member of the Board of Directors of International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes (IAGP) from 2000-2009, and from 2016-2022. He was co-chair of the pre-congress at the IAGP congress in Cartagena, Colombia in 2012. He is editor of the IAGP Globeletter, and chair of the IAGP Fellowship Awards Committee. He has also been involved in the IAGP group psychotherapy training project in Ramallah, Palestine. He is current teacher and trainer at the Chinese-Norwegian advanced training program in psychoanalytic and group analytic psychotherapy in Beijing, China. He has been lecturer at numerous international congresses, and he has published papers on Large Groups and on group analytic training.

e-mail: [island@iga.no](mailto:island@iga.no)

# Coffee Break with Thor-Kristian Island



50 years and beyond  
group competency for  
a world in conflict

**If you think about your experiences in the group sessions, which contexts or factors prepare the emergence of transformative moments in a group process?**

Trust. Trust is the prerequisite for people being willing and able to open up, to share, to disclose the most vulnerable and painful aspects of life to other members. To hope for, and believe in acceptance from the other, and to get help from your fellow group members. Trust is necessary for an ever deepening of communication, where hitherto unconscious material becomes conscious.

***“Curiosity, listening to and interest in learning from the patients, maintaining a “not knowing position” free from prejudice. Being reliable, and trustworthy. These are characteristics and values that should apply for all therapists.”***

**You have been working within different cultures. Can you tell us how the culture is affecting the group process?**

I have worked with people from and in different cultures, and I am more struck by the similarities than the differences of people in groups. We are all human beings, with the same fundamental needs. A difference might be to what extent people trust that it is safe to speak in the group. We know that a free and open dialogue is not possible in all societies. Being afraid of snitches in the group is not always a paranoid idea.



**Can you tell us about one particular group analysis session which has affected you?**

It is impossible to pick one session. There are so many heart-warming “moments of meeting”. When patients realize how previous traumatic experiences continued to destroy new relationship, until they find new understanding and solutions through the group process. Or, when a patient at her last session says: “this group has saved my life”.

**What did your experience with group analysis teach you about human beings?**

I believe group analysis has taught me what Foulkes stated already in 1946 that “Group analysis maintains that the group is prior to the individual. Human beings are social and relational. The individual is born into and is constituted by a network of other persons and communication processes which influence the individual from birth. Personal identity is achieved through the possibilities offered by the nature of this network. He is part of a social network, a little nodal point, as it were, in this network, and can only artificially be considered in isolation, like a fish out of water.”

***“For me it is important to be part of, and maintain a milieu among family, friends and colleagues were a free and open dialogue is possible, where different opinions can be expressed, contained, and accepted.”***

**What is your suggestion or message for young professionals?**

In this rapid changing world, I should be careful with suggestion for the next generation, but I might dare to emphasize the importance of maintaining the dialogue, even in challenging times when hostility seems to prevail. Dialogue means also to listen to the other, try to understand, and not only convince the other that your perspective is the only right.



**IAGP Member of the Week  
Thor-Kristian Island, Norway**

*Participated in the IAGP conference for the first time in Mexico City, 39 years ago.*

Thor-Kristian Island is a psychiatrist, psychotherapist and group analyst from Oslo, Norway. He is co-founder and previous director of Institute of Group Analysis (Norway). He was also co-founder of the Norwegian Group Psychotherapy Association (NGPF), where he is now honorary member. He has been training group analyst, supervisor and theory lecturer, as well as one of the large group conductors at the group analytic training program in Norway for more than 25 years.

He is honorary member of the European Group Analytic Training Institutions Network (EGATIN), and he has been member of the management committee of Group Analytic Society international (GASi). He was member of the Board of Directors of International Association for Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes (IAGP) from 2000-2009, and from 2016-2022. He was co-chair of the pre-congress at the IAGP congress in Cartagena, Colombia in 2012. He is editor of the IAGP Globeletter, and chair of the IAGP Fellowship Awards Committee. He has also been involved in the IAGP group psychotherapy training project in Ramallah, Palestine. He is current teacher and trainer at the Chinese-Norwegian advanced training program in psychoanalytic and group analytic psychotherapy in Beijing, China. He has been lecturer at numerous international congresses, and he has published papers on Large Groups and on group analytic training.

e-mail: [island@iga.no](mailto:island@iga.no)