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An Introduction to Tavistock-Style Group Relations Conference Learning

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Abstract

The authors outline the process of systems learning through participation in Tavistock-style group-relations conferences. Focusing on issues of design, basic underlying concepts, selected comments from members, and steps involved in grasping systems dynamics, they offer both background for and summary of the learning opportunities derived from these working conferences. The paper is designed for those individuals considering conference attendance or reflecting on their conference experience.

Key words: group-relations conferences, interpretation, authority, systems learning, projective identification, participant-observation, shared unconscious assumption, 'institution-in-the mind'.

The study of group relations brings the insights of psychoanalysis to the practicalities of everyday living.[1] This paper is offered as background. It is intended to help those who know little or nothing about group-relations conferences to orient themselves, and to be of technical interest to those who do. We are not offering a summary of the design of group-relations conferences, but rather attempting to engage the reader in the type of learning that this approach offers.

The seminal thinking was that of Wilfred Bion (1961). He was conducting a therapy group when he noticed the connection between what each individual member was doing or saying and the behaviour of the group as a whole. Focusing on this group dimension, he developed a theory that elaborated the interface between the individual and the group. Also we acknowledge the original contributions of A. Kenneth Rice (1966), Eric Trist (Trist and Sofer, 1959), Eric Miller (1976, 1989; Miller and Rice, 1967) and other pioneers, who developed these conferences as learning laboratories for the study of leadership, authority and organisational life.

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THE CONFERENCE

It is a university campus during vacation. Men and women from diverse professional contexts with luggage for a week are arriving and registering. Already present in another room are another group of people: the director and the staff. There is about to be a conference. But this is no ordinary conference. The advertisement had offered opportunities to learn from experience about leadership and authority through the process of participating in the conference itself.

The conference assembles; staff members sit around a director in a row facing the members, many of whom are clutching the brochure. The director introduces the staff and talks about the conference in general, inviting the administrator to give information about the house, meals, and other domestic matters. The members have been assigned to small groups. Places for meeting and precise times are important. Later, members will form their own groups for different reasons, but are placed by the staff for this first event.

The conference has begun, and for its duration the staff will provide opportunities to learn by attempting to make sense of what they see happening in the conference as whole and the groups in particular. The staff's group interventions will be based primarily on the experience evoked in them by the process of the varying groups, their collective sense of the conference task and their working relationships with the director and the other staff.

Members are told that, while there is a formal schedule of events, they are free to do as they wish within the limits of the law. This freedom allows them to take full responsibility for what they ultimately choose to do in the conference. The staff will provide opportunities to study these choices as part of the learning. Staff and members together will create a conference institution, the sole purpose of which is to be studied, with a focus on authority and leadership.

One member writes:

> The thing that intrigues me about the perspective is that it provides an extremely well developed vocabulary and practice for understanding and engaging with the place where the personal and the organisational, the 'private' and the 'public' intersect. At a time when, arguably, acuity about interpersonal and organisational dynamics is becoming an important part of what it means to be an effective manager, the conference exposed me to a powerful way of building a kind of insight, a way that I want to explore further.

He has grasped the essence of the approach: it is about learning ('engaging with') rather than teaching, about the unconscious mind in relation to the conscious (the 'private' vs the 'public'), and about the group as the creature of the individual and the individual as the creature of the group (the 'personal' and the 'organisational'). In essence, this spare conference structure provides a unique chance to experience the self in relation to others and in relation to a shared task. Beginning to see yourself as others see you is but one potential outcome.

This approach, developed by A. K. Rice and his colleagues, is founded not on teaching but learning. Underlying this approach to learning is a psychoanalytically informed stance. But this does not imply that the task itself lies somewhere in the field of group psychoanalysis.

There are three major psychoanalytic concepts that are extensively used in the conference. The basic notion is that of *unconscious functioning*: we are all moved about in life by much that is internal to us, but out of our awareness, both as individuals and in groups. Our unconscious functioning becomes evident through *transference* and *counter-transference* and the use of *projective identification*. 'Transference' refers to the ways our internalised images of others derived from our childhood experiences push us toward recreating familiar relationships in ways that can obscure the complexity of the people in our lives. 'Counter-transference' refers to our unconsciously derived reactions to being seen as someone we do not feel we are. 'Projective identification' (Klein, 1946; Shapiro and Carr, 1991; Zinner and Shapiro, 1972) refers to the way we unconsciously attempt to coerce others through covert actions to become the people we need them to be for our own unconscious and neurotic reasons. This unconscious coercion occurs both between individuals, and within and between groups. Through shared unconscious assumptions, groups manifest this phenomenon by developing rigid, stereotyped views of individual members or of other groups that are unchanged by additional information.

These phenomena are intrinsic to all relationships. In a conference focusing on how individuals and groups (note how inseparable these are) take up authority, how we relate to and use people become important data.

We notice three levels of group learning. The first is the heightened *recognition that individuals behave irrationally in the face of authority*. If, for example, a staff consultant, in his effort to focus on the group as a whole, does not respond to an individual member, the member may react with disproportionate outrage, joined by others.

What could be happening? For the dispassionate observer, this is extraordinary.

The next level is the *ability to recognise group functioning and see the ways in which conscious efforts toward collaborative work can be hampered by irrational thinking on the part of group members*.

Our correspondent notes:

> Participating in this conference was not easy. Indeed, on the purely personal level it was often confusing, frustrating, and occasionally painful. I have some questions in my mind as to whether this is a function of the particular Tavistock method or whether it is inherent to all authority and group life. At the beginning of the conference I was more inclined to the former view. But as the conference progressed, I began to see the value of the method and how it could be used to learn things about my own experience of authority and leadership that I would never get access to in a more traditional educational setting.

The third level of learning involves *a shift toward new ways of thinking*. The participant discovers 'a capacity to doubt the validity of perceptions which seem unquestionably true' (Palmer, 1979, p. 142). *This requires developing a capacity for both involvement and detachment*, similar to what Harry Stack Sullivan called 'participant-observation' (1953). If someone is to learn to lead (or even competently to follow), then this capacity to reflect on one's own involvement is crucial.

THE COMPONENTS OF LEARNING

A. K. Rice and his colleagues at the Tavistock Institute in London held the first such conference in 1957, focusing on studying authority and the dynamics of institutional life. As might be expected, because the issues explored are persistent aspects of human life – for example, authority, responsibility, relationships, and relatedness – the design of the conference has not changed greatly. While subsequent conference directors have shaped conference structures to respond to changes in society, it is still organised around four basic components: holding and containment, a series of specific group contexts, shared group dynamics, and a determined focus on the group and the developing institution. The four components are combined in a skeletal conference design and interact to create opportunities for members to join, engage in, and study institutional dynamics.

Holding and containment

The child psychiatrist, Donald Winnicott (1960) first described the 'holding environment'. Focusing on the bond between mother and child, he discerned the required environment for fundamental human development to occur. The mother has to be sufficiently empathic (in Winnicott's memorable phrase, 'good enough') and able to tolerate aggression. Only if the child encounters this maternal capacity will he or she gain a sense of self-esteem and discover that powerful impulses can be used creatively without destroying relationships. Rice does not use this language. But sufficient holding for the members is implicit in his conference design, particularly in the clarity of its boundaries.

One task of the staff is to be dependable so that members can feel secure and confident enough to cope with the anxiety, aggression, confusion, and new learning evoked by the lack of familiar guideposts. Bion (1977) described *containment* as the process through which an entity (the mother, the family, or a social organisation) holds anxiety-ridden aspects of experience within itself in order to detoxify them so that chaotic experience can be converted into independent thinking. Staff members accomplish this through providing an administration that attends to food, lodging, and other housekeeping help (Parish, 2007), by holding rigorously to time and space boundaries (being in the stated place at the announced time), by attempting to put the group process into words, and by unrelenting attention to the task and related roles. The staff's task focus is entirely on offering members opportunities to learn about authority and leadership in groups, resisting invitations to engage individual members in any other role or in relation to any other task.

When staff members attempt to make sense of the unfolding group process without focusing on individuals, members can feel ignored and treated badly. Their narcissism may feel injured and their irritation evoked. For example, in a small group, as members struggle to link their ideas, they may wonder what the staff consultant is thinking; one may ask him directly. Focusing on the group, and waiting to determine the group's response, the consultant might not feel he has enough information to respond. Other members might react with irritation to this silence, focusing on their frustration with the consultant. At some point, the consultant might intervene by pointing to the group's dependency, saying something like: 'In an effort to avoid facing your own uncertainty about noticing, sharing, and learning from your own experience, the group is acting as if the consultant has all the answers'. Such an effort to speak to

the group as a whole will inevitably be experienced by individuals as stressful and ungenerous, since such a single-minded group focus from the consultant ignores social niceties and the responsiveness to individual needs that are part of everyday life.

Specific group contexts

Nonetheless, by joining the conference, members have authorised the staff to work at this learning task in this particular way. Irritated, or even idealising, responses to those they have placed in charge of this task can then be understood as an aspect of a group dynamic about authority. When group interventions focusing on this dynamic are offered, members' beginning recognition of how the group as a whole is struggling to join the work – linked to the individual's experience of attempting to join the group as a member – constitutes learning.

There are several specific group contexts for the conference. Sets of assigned groups run their course and end; new ones take their place; friendships are made and dissolve. But at all times, participants are taking up roles and facing opportunities to engage learning from multiple perspectives:

1 *The individual member*. However deeply he or she becomes immersed in the life and dynamic of the conference, the member remains an individual and as such is responsible for his or her reactions to fellow members, staff, and other groups. In particular events, the individual will have the opportunity to receive and give delegated authority. This generates its own internal and group dynamic.
2. *Specific events*. Each event, such as large or small study groups (focusing on the process of joining), inter-group activities (studying relationships between groups), or application groups (focusing on applying the conference learning to members' outside roles) is a subsystem of the conference, with its own specific task which evokes characteristic dynamics.
3. *The moment within the event*. Whatever is happening in the here-and-now of the group process is an entry point for new learning; and
4. *The conference as a whole*. Given the focus on what is happening in the moment, any member's role in the conference institution as a whole will be difficult to grasp. The staff with the director, however, will be constantly working on grasping the whole conference, regularly offering their developing views to the members.

Group dynamics

While papers have been written on parts of the conference, none of these have been successful in adequately conveying the total conference experience. It is something that has to be undergone. Nevertheless, we can to some extent clarify some of the dynamics.

During the conference the member is located somewhere on a spectrum from using others to being used by them. Within the framework of events, individuals have the opportunity to work at the task of the conference – to study authority and leadership – with little explicit help from the staff except for group interventions. Inevitably, individuals try to establish relationships with other members. But at the same time, the group is being conceptualised and interpreted by the staff.

Each member is thus facing diverse tensions. On the one hand, individuals talk with other members. Given the spare structure, they are inevitably unclear about what to talk about. So, they try to find out about each other and discern what kind of structure they are working in. Inevitably they will also be talking about and demonstrating their authority and leadership in relation to the task at hand. At the same time, each member is trying to find connections to the staff member consulting to the group (in the context of the task of learning about authority), while the consultant ignores the member as an individual and only addresses the group as a whole.

An individual member who remains psychologically separate will find the consultant's comments unfocused. Since the consultant is addressing the group and individuals have hired the consultants to help them learn, the pressure is on each member to give up aspects of his or her individuality, identify and merge with the group, both to grasp the consultant's interventions and connect with other members. This collective surrender to a learning task and the group's effort to work with the consultants generate an interpretable group dynamic, focusing on authority.

The individual member works with what is inside his or her mind in the context of what others are both saying to and seeing in him or her. This experience is intense. But it also takes place within a specific event: a small study group, a large study group, or an intergroup event. Over time, the group begins to share unconscious assumptions (Bion, 1961). Though, as the conference institution takes shape, these shared unconscious assumptions inevitably become more refined and complex, initially they are of three basic types:[2]

1. *Dependency*, in which the group becomes passive and looks, usually, to its staff consultant for rescue from confusion;
2. *Pairing*, a variant of dependency, when the group turns to a couple (a member–consultant pair, or a heterosexual or homosexual pair), who are seen as an idealised hope for producing a solution for the group's problems; and
3. *Fight/flight*, a quite different and more volatile assumption, in which the group acts as if fighting with the task (or the staff consultant as representing the task of studying authority) or fleeing from the work are the only alternatives.

Beginning to recognise these and other shared assumptions – through the staff's and, ultimately, the members' interpretations – as a collective flight from work, can allow members to refocus their attention on the task and the unfolding institution.

In addition, each separate event is experienced and worked with as an aspect of the wider conference. For example there are up to twelve sessions of small study group in the schedule. This set of sessions is a subsystem of the whole conference. It builds up its own dynamic culture. Held in the same place, with the same members and the same staff consultant, it becomes familiar. Indeed, amid the stresses of a conference it may even seem like 'home base'. Yet this system also exists in relation to the rest of the conference and both influences, and is influenced by, the unfolding unconscious behaviour of the group within the series of meetings. And all this takes place within the setting of the conference as a whole, which generates an 'institutional' dynamic.

Within the conference institution as a whole, the entire membership – in separate groups, one large group, and varying inter-group events – begins to shape its dynamic interaction with the staff they have authorised to lead the learning task. A temporary institution is being created for the purpose of studying itself.

A determined focus on the group and the developing institution

Finally, this approach makes the group unequivocally the focus of attention and interpretation. This is not done, as with a therapy group, as a means to assist the individual to develop greater self-awareness and understanding. The group itself, and the group alone, is the focus of study. From this perspective, the *group* is defined as any collection of individuals linked by a shared task. In a conference, this includes each small group, the large group, groups organised by members, and the staff group. The method is designed

to provide a way of understanding the unique temporary conference institution as it develops; it is an opportunity for individuals to grasp the impact of human systems and their engagement in them. The individual discovers how he or she is always part of a social construct. Indeed for many during the conference there may be an experience of personal dissolution: where does the group end and 'I' begin? But the group is always part of a larger group – for example, the temporary conference institution as a whole. And then, individuals begin to notice that they are locating the conference in an even larger context, such as nations, societies, or cultures.

By the end of a conference, members will have had the experience of regressing into joining a group. They will have experienced and discovered the existence of unconscious group dynamics and witnessed and experienced the irrational, group influenced responses to designated leadership and authority. They will have had opportunities, through their own active efforts, to create an organisation. They will see the ways in which leadership can be authorised or undercut by group dynamics, and they will have seen or carried out forms of leadership and delegation. They will have noticed the ways particular persons behave in particular roles, and experienced the way aspects of their own person are used projectively by others. They will also have noticed the significance of *boundaries* (time, territory and task), *roles*, and *task* for organising and shaping institutional life, and begun to develop a picture of how the institution, as they are carrying that notion in their minds, shapes work. Finally, they will have the opportunity to begin to apply these conference experiences to their outside organisational lives.

All conferences are to some degree reflections of the social context in which they take place. They are not, and cannot be, isolated from society or a culture. But a central dilemma, as the conference ends, is how staff and members can sustain and make use of the conference institution as they have shaped it in their minds. Such a self-consciously and collectively shaped institution-in-the-mind provides a model for grasping some of the ways we create our social institutions and provides opportunities to learn how we might use them as access points to begin to grasp the outside world (Shapiro and Carr, 1991, 2006).

CONCLUSION

It is with some trepidation that we have written this paper. It has been almost a tradition (at least in the UK) not to write about conferences. The reason given is that when the immediacy of experience in the

moment becomes a recounting of past experience, the vitality, originality, and creativity of the exercise can be lost. This purist stance has deprived us of much wisdom, although it is understandable.

The reader can begin to see that a path is emerging that runs from a psychoanalytic base to the study of groups; in so doing it authenticates the principles of psychoanalysis but leaves them behind. It moves toward groups and social systems rather than individuals, and toward a consultative process in relation to the whole rather than an in-depth psychological examination of the individual. This is the laboratory that these working conferences offer for beginning to grasp institutional and social process.

Notes

1. Group study based upon the Tavistock tradition is undergirded by Kleinian theory (Klein, 1946). The phrase 'Tavistock tradition' has a slightly different nuance in the UK and the US. In the UK, studies from the beginning involved members who were not in the medical profession. The studies in the US were launched from the Washington Institute of Psychiatry and have continued to have a medical bias.
2. Wilfred Bion first described these basic assumptions in *Experiences in Groups*. There have been suggestions about other basic assumptions, but none has as yet carried complete conviction.

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