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POTENTIAL SPACE – A SOURCE FOR CREATIVITY AND TERRIFYING ANXIETY
Exploring possibilities and limitations in organizational work

EXPERIENCES IN THE FIRST ON-LINE GROUP RELATIONS CONFERENCE: LESSONS LEARNED

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Entering Cyberspace, a Potential Space for Creative Work

This is a report from “the front.” Doing something for the first time, something that one has had no specific training for, can feel like being under siege and putting oneself in the “line of fire.” Although other people have had experience as students, seminar registrants, and faculty with educational activities conducted entirely or primarily on the internet, I had not. My competence with computers was limited primarily to word processing and I had been slow to make use of the internet. So, it may seem in retrospect to have been bold, even foolhardy, to have accepted an invitation to work as a small study group consultant on the first group relations conference to be conducted entirely on the internet in 2006. But I did.

My reasons seemed adequate and prudent at the time: 1) I knew the director and his work well, first as a student and then as a colleague and friend; 2) He had worked under my direction on many non-residential weekend group relations conferences; 3) I respected his professionalism, integrity and skill; 4) He had used the internet for similar kinds of group work; 5) Even though I knew the principal co-sponsor only through his many posts on the ISPSO list on the internet, and was skeptical about the workability of collaboration between these two principals and between the organizations that they headed, I overcame my reservations because I wanted the challenge of doing something “cutting edge.” Many surprises, much turbulence, and distress ensued, but I survived the experience intact, with a strong sense that, as a senior in the fields of group relations conferences, group psychology, and group psychotherapy, I have a professional obligation to evaluate and report my experience working on line, at the front.

What follows here are some of my observations and thoughts. These cannot be taken as a comprehensive report of conference work in cyberspace or as an objective evaluation of it and its potential. In short, I believe much worthwhile learning took place. This may be a story of the human capacity to make sense of chaos, to learn through encounters with psychosis - a case, perhaps, of “making lemonade out of lemons.” You can be the judge. However, I urge caution in arriving at conclusions.

Pre-conference Preparation

The story begins with recruitment of Staff and subsequently of conference members. The two originating co-sponsors of the event were Orgdyne Training and Consulting, LLC (Orgdyne) and the Chicago Center for the Study of Groups and Organizations (CCSGO), an Affiliate of the A.K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems (AKRI). Anil Behal, Ph.D. is director of Orgdyne and Jeffrey D. Roth, M.D. is president of CCSGO. The Conference Director invited people with group relations conference experience from different parts of the world to join the staff and the director of Orgdyne recommended several individuals with training in the tradition of the National Training Laboratories (NTL) for positions on the Conference staff. Dr. Behal accepted the position of Assistant Director of Administration for the Conference.

Since the originating co-sponsors had been agreed that this conference would be announced as a group relations conference in the Tavistock tradition, the Conference Director invited only those having firsthand knowledge of such ‘working conferences’ as well as considerable experience with other experiential training models. Even though several persons declined to join the Staff, for a variety of reasons, a qualified and diverse Staff group was assembled (Appendix A): one from India, two from Israel, one from Peru (with affiliations in France), four from USA, one from Mexico (with professional training and work in France and the USA), and one from the United Kingdom (originally from Spain). Two Staff members resigned before the pre-conference work began, one from South Africa and the other from the USA.

Overall, eight of the remaining Staff members were identified more with the Tavistock tradition than with work in models such as the International Forum for Social Innovation (IFSI) in France or the National Training Laboratory (NTL) in the USA. Of the six men and five women on staff, five were more closely affiliated professionally and personally with the Conference Director than with the Assistant Director of Administration.

Pre-conference staff work included the preparation of the brochure and its distribution. The major co-sponsoring organization (Orgdyne) whose director was now in the conference role of Assistant Director of Administration was to provide the technical facilities for announcing and promoting the conference via the internet and had responsibility for arranging or designing the means for our staff communications. And as is customary, that team would process the applications and register members for the conference. All staff members, however, were kept aware of and were more or less involved in all these aspects of the pre-conference work. Passwords assigned to each staff member gave us access to the bulletin board with on-line communications between the Director, the Head of the Administrative Team, and all Staff. Although our input was requested, preparations and details of distribution were left largely to the Director and the Administrative Team.

In selecting Staff personnel, the Director had asked all Staff members to help with the recruitment of conference members. By accepting a Staff position, we agreed to promote the conference and recruit four or more registrants. Some balked at this requirement and declined joining the conference Staff. Just as the conference was about to begin, one Staff member offered his resignation because he had been unable to recruit registrants and felt that his contract to join Staff was now null and void. Several Staff members urged him to continue and he did.

After much effort, uncertainty and consternation about whether enough members would be registered to hold the conference, 14 members, five men and nine women, were registered and had paid fees of \$500 or \$250. The membership group included five women from the USA, one man and one woman from Canada, two men and two women

from India, one man from China, one woman from Spain, and one man from the United Kingdom. This number of registrants was considered sufficient to hold the conference, which would be composed of two small study groups, the large group and two review and application groups. The third here-and-now component of the typical group relations conference, the inter-group or institutional event, was unfeasible and cancelled due to the small size of the membership.

Before discussing more of my experience of the pre-conference work, the group dynamics of joining the Staff, recruiting members, and designing the program of events, I would also like to know how many of you are familiar with the Tavistock model or have attended a group relations conference since their introduction in Great Britain more than 50 years ago. For those unfamiliar with these “working conferences” Appendix A and Appendix B provide some orientation. Are there any questions at this point?

On-Line Group Relations

In designing an on-line group relations conference, a major decision concerned whether communications would take place asynchronously by means of a “bulletin board,” where messages are posted 24/7, or in a “chat room” with participants simultaneously at their keyboards and monitors posting in real time. Although the Conference Director had had more experience with the “chat room” format, he also had worked asynchronously, and with input from the Assistant Director of Administration, he decided that all conference events but the last, the Plenary Conference Review, would be conducted asynchronously. This decision was prompted by their mutual interest in making this conference available to a broad international membership, appreciating that differences in time zones would make simultaneous posting unavoidably inconvenient for some participants.

The next question of program design was how to adapt the basic elements of the Tavistock model to the internet. How would the critically important boundaries of time, task, role, and space be articulated and managed? In this case, the director of the conference who was also president of an AKRI Affiliate had negotiated with the director of Orgdyne which was one of the primary sponsoring organizations, to have full authority

to direct the conference, including the selection of Staff, assignment of Staff roles. It had been agreed that the conference would be designed, announced, and conducted in the Tavistock tradition. As is now customary in this tradition, the Director sought a diverse but balanced Staff, composed of men and women from different professional backgrounds and countries with competence and experience in the Tavistock model.

The conference brochure announced the conference as “working with authority and power in organizational systems,” designed for individuals “who wish to study the exercise of authority in groups and understand more about their own reactions to exercising and encountering authority.” This announcement was consistent with the more traditional statements of purpose, rather than with the more contemporary trend to announce themes such as: *Leadership and the Dynamics of Dissent in Organizational Life; Organizations in Transition; or, Embracing a World of Difference.*

The conference brochure as it was widely distributed on the internet is included as Appendix A and provides other details of the announced program and Staff.

These decisions caused little comment from Staff and were hardly unexpected even by those less experienced with the Tavistock model. Comments flew, however, once the Director announced how the Staff would be deployed. He identified three Staff, myself and two others with extensive group relations conference experience and whose work he knew well, as Senior Staff, and that Senior Staff would receive a slightly greater percentage of conference profits, should there be any. I felt pleased and comfortable with this decision, but was not surprised to hear how much feeling to the contrary was stirred. Competition for status and recognition came to the fore. Several staff members felt that such a hierarchical culture was unnecessary, uncongenial, and inimical to the aims of learning about group process. I do not recall any explicit use of the terms “undemocratic” or “hierarchy” (except in my own responses to some of the objections expressed by several other Staff members). The implications of the announcement of senior staff evoked reactions that seemed indicative not simply of personal concerns for power and recognition, but also to represent geopolitical preferences relating perhaps to

“colonialism.” The international aspects of this conference and its cultural diversity began to emerge.

Similarly, when the Director announced that some Staff would serve as observers and not as consultants in one or another of the here-and-now events and in the role analysis groups, many Staff posted comments and expressed their discontent with the assignments, because they seemed to imply that some persons were of lesser importance, possessing of fewer qualifications, or less competent.

These reactions and internet postings, for better or worse, served as a way for us as Staff to get to know each other. The process of becoming a working group was underway. Although the Director had provided some guidance and leadership by example with regard to how we might introduce ourselves to each other on-line, Staff exchanges covered a wide range of professional and personal background information. My first impressions were based on whether or not the posts gave me a sense of whether my new colleagues were open or defensive and whether or not they seemed comfortable with themselves and aware of others as well as of task. Not unlike my way of assessing others in Staff roles in face-to-face group relations conferences, I tried to learn whether my co-workers were self-aware, aware of their impact on others, and aware of their reactions to group-as-whole dynamics.

As other Staff members posted, it was not long before I found myself forming initial characterizations, finding some cold, others more responsive, one eager to protect others from bad feelings, another quick-to-challenge, another given to free associations and the use of metaphors, and another task-bound and rule-bound. I found myself feeling unusually apprehensive, anxious, and ambivalent about the viability of the enterprise despite largely positive feelings about the level of sophistication and sensitivity being expressed by individual members of the Staff in these early, pre-conference postings. I found that I had serious doubts about whether the Staff would emerge as a *work* group – one which could provide a *good enough* holding environment to enable meaningful experiential learning to take place.

During the pre-conference staff interactions, which went on for weeks under the title “Opening Comments”, there were 5203 “views” (observations) and 394 “replies” (posts or comments) (Roth, 2007). The Assistant Director of Administration posted 131 times for 33% of the total. My participation was the second most active; I posted 56 times for 14% of the total. The Director was fourth in terms of frequency and posted 34 times for 9% of the total. These numbers, of course, do not convey the feelings and dynamics being expressed, perceived, and alleged or interpreted. I include them here to indicate a kind of data that is available for analysis and interpretation when working on-line.

In reporting on the pre-conference work among the Staff, it is important to note that in his leadership roles, this Director places a high value on staff preparation and on building a cohesive team. Further, it is important to note that the Staff included several different clusters or sub-groups, some along obvious demographic lines such as gender and race. Perhaps even more salient were sub-grouping around who had worked with whom in other settings and who had a prior sense of affiliation with either of the two major sponsoring organizations or with the Director or with the Assistant Director of Administration. Given the novelty of the enterprise for all of us, as well as the complex but not altogether unusual relations and identifications among Staff members, we should not be surprised that our coming together as a work group would indeed be difficult, fraught with tension and conflict.

For several of us, the technology seemed to be the focus of more frustration and feeling of helplessness than the personal or professional relationships among us. Getting on the internet, reading and sending messages was for some a simple matter. Yet, for me and a few other Staff, clicking on the Orgdyne Invision Board and entering those sites set-up exclusively for our conference communications was a baffling exercise. I stumbled for weeks to use the technology, exposing my feelings of incompetence, helplessness, dependency, confusion, and frustration.

From a social systems' point of view, I was carrying those feelings on behalf of the Staff as a whole. I was so filled with frustration and apprehension early in this phase of the on-line conference that I had several sleepless nights and found myself, for this and other reasons, offering my resignation just days before the close of member registration and the beginning of conference work.

My stressful feelings were not only focused on the internet forums, which seemed unnecessarily awkward and non-rational in their design, but also on the relationship emerging between the Director and the Assistant Director of Administration. The Director, I felt, had not prepared himself sufficiently to embark on such an innovative project, had not anticipated sufficiently the problems which would arise with the Assistant Director who was principal of an organization very different from CCSGO and also inexperienced with the Tavistock model. The director in this conference would be working with a new staff of international professionals highly invested in experiential learning about groups, even as their backgrounds and affiliations were diverse, but many on staff were new to him and to each other as well.

The Assistant Director of Administration seemed to have little awareness of the ways in which his role as head of Orgdyne would interact with his role as Assistant Director of Administration and what might be required to manage these interconnected roles. Although he announced with enthusiasm how grateful he was to have the Conference Director as his mentor, I saw little evidence of positive affects of their relationship. Clearly as both head of one of the sponsoring organizations and as Assistant Director of Administration in the conference, he was in a difficult position. He was launching an innovative conference on the internet, trying to engage and please the Staff, trying to learn more about the Tavistock model, trying to recruit and enroll fee-paying members, while also struggling with myths and pre-conceptions of Tavistock as foreign to some of his own cherished beliefs about team work and groups. Understandably, he was persistent in demonstrating that his primary investment was in Orgdyne Training & Consulting, LLC and his own way of doing things. It became increasingly apparent to me that the aims and culture of that organization were different and not entirely compatible with

those of CCSGO. Since the president of CCSGO and the Conference Director, regarded himself as having been mentored by me in group relations conference work, the situation was fraught with conflict and splitting, and possible danger. My holding several roles within this system and the systems-context could easily serve to deflect painful projections away from the Director, and in fact, there were several intensely heated exchanges between me and Assistant Director of Administration during this pre-conference phase.

During the pre-conference work, anxiety about enrollment of members prompted the Assistant Director of Administration to make the suggestion that fees be reduced or forgiven. This only increased my apprehension about boundaries, particularly about how his role as head of Orgdyne and his conference role of assistant director of administration were being understood and enacted. In this context, with an enrollment smaller than anticipated, the Director announced a contingency plan to reduce Staff size and also the possibility of re-negotiating with registered conference members their willingness to enroll in a re-designed program with fewer events.

In response to these plans, the Assistant Director of Administration quickly posted several suggestions to the whole Staff. One motion was to have the unemployed Staff join the conference as members. In other ways, he also seemed to promote changes that would level the hierarchical aspects of the “Tavi” model. All these events raised my anxiety in the here-and-now and made me concerned about the future: Would the Staff be able to provide a “good enough” holding environment for the learning through first-hand experience about authority and leadership, power and influence? Learning through experience is central to the Tavistock tradition and is announced as the aim of the on-line conference.

During these difficult pre-conference days, the Assistant Director of Administration continued his praise of the Director as his mentor. These laudatory posts seemed lavish and further aggravated my anxieties. I read them as seductive “lip service,” unconnected to any signs of his own improved role performance and boundary management. The

Director's response at this time seemed too gentle and struck me as inadequate and only added to my anxieties about the future of the Staff as a "good enough" holding environment for learning.

At this time and in this context, having been directly involved in the recruitment of at least four of the 14 enrolled conference members, I felt an extra measure of responsibility for the quality and integrity of the conference. My apprehensions about what lay ahead; my doubts about the stability and the dynamics of the Staff group were so great that I felt intense pressure to resign. It took an off-line phone conversation with the Director to reassure me that he was after all sufficiently aware of the overall situation before I found myself able to engage again with the work at hand.

I will again pause here to ask whether particular questions have occurred to you at this point which you would like to raise before we continue.

Group Relations On-Line: Experience and Process

The conference itself began as announced on September 19, 2006. Staff work had begun 2 ½ months before, on July 1st. Because the number of registrants was 14, the conference program was redesigned and consisted of two small study groups (SG) with seven members, two consultants and one Staff observer each; one large group (LG) with two consultants and one Staff observer; two role analysis groups (RAG); and a plenary conference review session open to all members and Staff. With this structure, the conference would be essentially as described in the brochure and all Staff would be employed. This revision included no institutional event (IE). Staff had opportunities to express their feelings and views of these changes, and all agreed to work with the revised program and new alignment of roles.

All Staff remained employed and all but one were assigned opportunities to work in consultant roles either in the Small Groups, Large Group, or in the Role Analysis Groups. Only one Staff member, the Assistant Director of Administration, did not work in a consulting role. He was designated as an "observer" in two here-and-now events and,

because of his strong inclination to identify with or “join” the membership, the Director asked him to remain silent and in the observer’s role during the Plenary Conference Review. However, his participation throughout the conference on both Staff Boards and Member Boards was active and raised many questions from both Staff and members about where the boundaries were and whether the management of boundaries was “good enough” for quality experiential learning to take place on those boundaries.

Separate bulletin boards for the four different Staff teams (SG, LG, RAG, and Administrative Team) as well as a board for communications addressed to all staff members had been set-up for our work during the conference itself. These new arrangements did not seem to settle concerns about boundaries and these team boards were accessible to all Staff. We were asked not to enter without announcing our presence as observers. Yet there was a recurring sense that the teams were working in open spaces with loose boundaries, if any at all. Concerns and fantasies among Staff about whether members also had access to these Staff “boards” were not easily put to rest. Uneasiness persisted about “who” was entering whose “room,” knowingly or unwittingly violating boundaries intended to mark group distinctions (Membership and Staff, different event groups, different Staff teams).

Throughout the conference, concerns about boundary violations were expressed by both Members and Staff. The fact that Dr. B. as head of Orgdyne and also as Conference Assistant Director of Administration posted messages to individual Members and Staff as the conference was in process, was experienced by many as inappropriate, even intrusive. In addition, Dr. B. sent messages through e-mail outside of the conference board inviting certain members to serve on staff of the next on-line conference that he was organizing through Orgdyne, which would incorporate and adapt the Tavistock model currently underway. These communications, which discreetly requested that those persons contacted keep the invitation confidential, contributed further fuel to the view that boundaries were being violated.

To what extent and in what ways the Staff-as-a-whole, and perhaps the Membership as well, colluded to place and keep Dr. B. in this disturbing role was not well enough explored at the time, and so he remained, perhaps more on behalf of the Staff-as-a-whole than we grasped at the time, loaded in the role “the other,” the renegade or the revisionist. Angry splitting was now visible to all, and Dr. B. found himself more aligned with the Membership, presumed to be also oppressed and misunderstood, than with Staff.

Other sensitive issues of blurred boundaries, experiences of violations, special relationships with private communications and “secrets” were brought forward and explored. One conference member who had received a confidential invitation from Dr. B. to join the staff of the next conference, acknowledged this to her psychotherapy group. This Member was a patient in the Conference Director’s private practice psychotherapy group. In his role as therapist he encouraged the patient to give up the secret and share this information and her feelings about it in the Conference. When she did so, Members and Staff reacted, of course, and there was further confusion and consternation about “good” and “bad,” about seductions, incest, and victims and perpetrators. Other special relationships came to light. Associations emerged to events in personal histories, with some exploration of the sense of violation and abuse here and in other personal and family relationships.

Were trust and boundaries violated? Did these private communications have serious negative impact on the work? Anger, shame, anxiety about violations and abuse were strong and issues about permeable, blurred, and unstable boundaries were persistent. Questions were voiced about the survival of the enterprise itself and further, of course, about the “validity” of the “Tavistock model.” Was the on-line conference damaged beyond repair? Would it implode? Was it a safe enough space for experiential learning?

The Staff remained sufficiently cohesive that they were (all but one) present and participated constructively in the Plenary Conference Review. However, only nine Members participated in the Plenary Review and, in addition to the absence of five, other indications of splitting and unresolved antagonisms were evident. Had we been able to

involve more members in a deeper exploration of issues of seduction and competition in relation to authority and leadership, I believe more learning would have occurred.

Early in the Staff's development, the usual avoidant, ambivalent, challenging, and seductive behaviors toward the Director, as well as toward each other, were present. However, in this particular conference, these were more difficult to identify and resolve, largely because of the lack of face-to-face encounters during prescribed time periods. The limitations and the lack of boundaries of cyberspace, and also the architecture or format of the boards on which we expressed ourselves augmented the conditions of ambiguity, inviting projections and misunderstandings. One example: frequent e-mails arrived alerting us that one or another Staff member had just posted on the Staff pre-conference board. When I would click to open the "board" to read the latest message, I would find that it was a message from some other Staff member.

In retrospect, a small matter. At the time, though, this was another confusing aspect of trying to keep track of who said what, when, to whom, and in response to what said by whom. Adding to a sense of unreliability, frustration and impairment was the fact that I would receive duplicate and triplicate e-mail announcements. My experience was that the technological tools were not logical, not convenient, and not "consumer friendly" was compounded by the format, design, and unadmendability of the Invision Power Board itself. It seemed to me that there were many more icons, many more buttons to press, many more options than I thought I needed to participate effectively. My experiences of frustration led to frank feelings of impairment, stupidity and incompetence.

The board included a selection of icons, called "emoticons," which were tiny faces drawn to signify a wide range of emotions, facial expressions, and feelings. These were perpetually available and some Staff and Members used them to punctuate their communications. Although I could recognize the "smiley" and the "frown," many of these were foreign to me and hindered rather than enhanced communication. These emoticons were small, hard to read on my monitor, and harder still for me to know when and how to use them, even had I wanted to, which I did not. In my previous conference

experiences with the customary face-to-face format, I worked to express myself primarily with words. In cyberspace, the reliance on language seemed to be of even greater importance, yet more unstable, uncertain, or ephemeral.

Working on-line deprives one of much sensory input and one is more prone to dissociate and to have fewer data with which to counter or resist the sway of fantasy and *basic assumptions*. The hunger for connectedness to other real and sensual human beings may be so difficult to respond to and resolve when working in cyberspace that these feelings are experienced with more intensity, more shame, leaving more room for projections of the taboo and forbidden. In this context, scapegoating, and “role lock” (Agazarian, 1997), as well as the need to withdraw, may present special challenges to studying group relations on-line.

Before discussing the lessons learned, let me pause again for questions and comments.

Lessons Learned: Ethical Questions, Evaluation of Outcomes, and Professional Standards

In an interview by a historian of science with Albert Einstein only two weeks before his death, Einstein reportedly made the following comment on a recent and controversial book:

You know, it is not a bad book. No, it really isn't a bad book. The only trouble with it is, it is crazy. (as quoted by I.B. Cohen, 1955)

Cohen, the interviewer, noted that Einstein accompanied his comment with a loud burst of laughter before saying more about what he meant by that distinction. Einstein explained that the author had based some of his ideas on modern science, yet when scientists did not agree with his views, turned around to attack the scientists. Cohen, continuing the discussion, replied:

. . . the historian often encountered this problem: Can a scientist's contemporaries tell whether he is a crank or a genius when the only evident fact is his **unorthodoxy?**

To which, Einstein replied, “There is no objective test.”

So it is for us. How can we conclude so soon after the first group relations conference in cyberspace whether it was a creative breakthrough or “crazy”? There is no objective test. I am reasonably satisfied that it was not “bad.” I am, however, much less satisfied that it wasn’t “crazy.” Feelings of craziness and stress, and in such high doses, may be intrinsic to, or even enriching parts of *learning through experience*. Whether such feelings are necessary concomitants of meaningful learning and productive outcomes is another question and one about which the jury is still out.

Based on my work in group relations conferences over a 40-year period, I believe that the enduring worth of working conferences in the Tavistock tradition rests finally on several distinctive elements: 1) A resolute commitment to providing space for individuals to study the exercise of, and encounters with authority and leadership under well structured and well managed conditions which provide freedom for individuals to participate and behave as they will while accepting responsibility for their own learning and behavior; 2) Staff commitment to provide these opportunities to learn by working in the here and now as managers and consultants, attending to clear boundaries of role, task, time, territory, and perhaps technology, the mode or medium of social interchange ; 3) Staff commitment to task and their training and skill in participating and interpreting group processes; 4) Staff competence and integrity with regard to tracking projections and understanding the impact of covert processes on themselves and their impact on the life of the group-as-a-whole.

There are still no objective tests of competency or objective measures of conference outcomes. There are studies using the systematic methods of the social sciences which use conference work as the context for research into matters of gender and authority (Cytrynbaum, 1985) and of conference outcomes (Klein, et al, 1983; Lipgar, Bair, & Fichtner, 2003; Lipgar & Struhl 1995). But unfortunately, as is the case in other related fields of practice such as psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, research studies have had little impact on application and the advancement of different schools of thought, models or theories. Practitioners are known in general to resist research.

Evaluations of staff competence, of learning outcomes as functions of different group relations conference staffs and models, and of other experiential educational program designs remain almost entirely based on subjective judgments or knowledge derived from and tested in clinical practice. Subjective judgments and clinical knowledge are prone to be influenced by psychosocial politics of the group and organizational context. Objective data collected scientifically must be used to make the dialogue more rational and the decision-making more reality-based. Until more organizations, including CCSGO, AKRI, and such organizations as Orgdyne and the other co-sponsors of the first on-line group relations conference make more explicit use of objective data and submit data in support of their judgments, their authorization of these educational events remains murky and more likely to be driven by considerations extraneous to the merits of the enterprise.

We are left, I believe, with a “buyer beware” situation which, as Einstein sensed, may not be “bad,” but may expose more of us than we would like to more “craziness” than we can stomach. With technology continuing to accelerate our interactions and global awareness of each other, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that the judgments and consciousness of history keep pace by accelerating the use of science to evaluate and refine our use of these new technologies.

The following questions are, perhaps, of immediate concern: Would I serve on the staff of another on-line conference if asked? Would I recommend participation on such on line endeavors to colleagues and students? What recommendations would I make that might increase the effectiveness of the next on line group relations conference?

Yes, I would take a staff position again for an on-line conference but only if I am confident that the institutional sponsorship has a degree of authenticity and that the authorization of the director is appropriate to his/her qualifications. Yes, I would recommend this way of studying group relations to others, but only selectively to those I knew well enough to have a thoughtful discussion with them about their preparation and expectations. I would recommend changes in the announcement brochure to alert prospective applicants to the specific requirements and limitations of the technology and

of the method. At the same time I would prepare the administrative team to manage the process of bringing applicants across the membership boundary with thoughtful and consistent attention to the applicants' preparedness and interest. I would have the technical aspects of the "boards" designed to be easier to use with more recognizable and delimited spatial boundaries. And finally, I would provide more information in advance regarding how space and time boundaries have been arranged on-line and the rationale behind their arrangement.

We can, though the internet, make experiential learning vastly more available to a more broadly diverse population. We can explore new ways to study, enrich, and evaluate experiential learning as we work in cyberspace. As the work becomes increasingly global, as the power and influence of the Tavistock label grows, a new sensitivity emerges both within AKRI and others who conduct similar conferences in many other countries concerning what is the real "Tavi model" and what is merely a copy - a reproduction with more or less fidelity to the original. If we are concerned with "truth in advertising," then, questions emerge concerning who is presenting the "real" thing and how can that be determined? Who is authorized to conduct "a working conference in the Tavistock tradition?"

Such concerns, I believe, are parallel and have much in common with old and new controversies in other fields. In the fields of art and archaeology, for example, questions concerning matters of authenticity, fraud, and the value of reproductions not only fascinate the press and the public, but test the mettle of many experts and academicians in fields of art history and restoration, religion, politics, science, and the economics of the market place. Beliefs, reputations, and large sums of money are at stake.

I will comment here only briefly on the "authenticity" of what was touted as the "first-ever on-line group relations conference in the Tavistock tradition." I would argue that the quality of any of these conferences be evaluated in terms of their learning output. The learning output in group relations conferences is to a significant measure a function of the authenticity of its authorization. In this on-line conference, the authorizations of Director

and Staff for this conference were compromised. Despite the qualifications that may justify self-authorization by the Director and many of the Staff, important authorizations by the sponsoring organizations appear to be less solid. The partnership of the principle organizations and their principals were in my view more driven by *basic assumptions* than by *work*. To paraphrase Freud's metaphor about the relationship of the Id and the Ego, the jockey may think he is riding the horse, but the horse is in charge.

This group relations conference involved more stress and "craziness" than is usual and more than is useful for "good enough," meaningful outcomes. There was intense experiencing of and some learning about the effects of irregular and unstable boundary conditions. But there was not enough learning about leadership and authority for a large enough portion of the conference membership. It is to the credit of the Director, his Staff, his work with the Staff, and their work with the membership, that opportunities for experiential learning were abundant and that much learning did in fact take place. What some Staff and some members were able to glean from these intense experiences, however, was more related to aberrations than to achievements.

It is not unusual for similar charges of aberrations to be leveled at other group relations conferences. Participants and theorists continue to question whether the frequently observed dynamics of aggression and regression are caused by the Tavistock model or whether the model simply provides authentic opportunities to study such phenomena as inevitable, even normal, impediments to learning about multiple obstacles to *work*, effective leadership and group functioning.

Authentic institutional authorization can provide support in terms of a culture of values as well as support in terms of procedures and structures. The challenge for the conference director and staff, whether on-line or face-to-face, is to achieve and maintain a balance of regulatory practices with openness and the freedom to explore the new, the unexpected, even the unspeakable. Bion pointed to this dilemma when he spoke of the "mystic" or "genius" in dynamic relationship with the "establishment." (Bion, 1970).

In this on-line conference, there were strong and conflicting feelings expressed within Staff, usually voiced by the Assistant Director of Administration, and within the membership, by one male member in particular, repeatedly equating “tradition” with “old” and the repression of change. The politics of “colonialism” was visible again as a backdrop. By implication, “new” was touted as good and “old,” referring in this case to “Tavi,” was bad.

The Director and the senior consultants at one point were angrily taunted as “pontiff” and “his archbishops” by the Assistant Director of Administration. In context, this use of religious symbols carried the message that we, the “Tavi” staff, were oppressive, inaccessible, arrogantly mistaken in our certitudes, and possibly corrupt. By the end of the Plenary Conference Review, the split of “good” and “bad” objects seemed, at least within the staff group, to have been bridged, if not healed. The Assistant Director of Administration gave voice at the end to his new appreciation for the observer role and to how much productive learning had come from the role of silent observer. Within the Membership, however, both with regard to the authority of Staff and that within the member group, the splitting was sharply evident, hardly healed, expressed verbally and non-verbally by the decision not to participate in the Plenary Conference Review. Post-conference comments from Members and Staff further confirmed still unresolved ambivalences and antagonisms.

Careful review and analysis of the final plenary session may offer one the most telling ways by which the success of these working conferences can be evaluated: To what extent are conference members as a group able to reflect on its own intra-group tensions in such a way that they gain insight about their inter-relatedness and pertinence to their attitudes toward authority as personified by the Director and the Staff? Plenary review sessions in general provide rich and relevant data with which to make such critical assessments. Analyzing these data, however, in the context of this conference must wait for another paper or for further comment now during our discussion time here.

I wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Stanley DeLoach for his many thoughtful editorial suggestions.

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APPENDIX A



GRC on line conference brochure.pdf

APPENDIX B

The Tavistock model, at least as articulated by A.K. Rice and his close associates, very much depends on specifying and maintaining particular sets of boundaries while allowing complete freedom to the individual to behave as he or she wishes with the understanding that each will take responsibility for his or her own behavior and choices. As people explore their freedoms, test the structural integrity of the social system of conference and staff and test themselves and their own ego strengths, anxiety is aroused and runs high. Containing and metabolizing group and individual anxieties is a critical aspect of the competencies of the director and staff in their management and consulting roles. Much of the staff's effort among themselves as a working group is directed toward maintaining a sensitive and empathic involvement with conscious and unconscious, overt and covert experiences in order to differentiate those feelings and fantasies aroused in them in the course of the social processes from those they themselves bring with them into these situations. Meaningful interpretative work requires this self-study and self-awareness on the part of the conference staff.

For “working” conferences in this tradition, it may be considered that this self-awareness is foundational and is the cornerstone most directly derived from the work of Freud and psychoanalysis. This came by way of Wilfred Bion to A.K. Rice, Turquet, Sutherland, Miller and others at the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations and the Tavistock Clinic. The model rests also on the understanding of social systems which was the work of Rice, Miller and other associates in the Tavistock Center for Human Relations. What is known now worldwide as the “Tavistock model” is really an A.K. Rice/Tavistock model which combines psychoanalytic theory and perspectives with social systems theory -- together, elucidating the covert and overt effects of structure and the dynamics of boundary management on leadership and authority in organizations and institutions.

Competence in staff roles requires a keen sense of self-awareness under conference conditions so that projections can be owned and metabolized and learning through experiences in the here and now can be optimized. Until recently, competence had been evaluated by peers and colleagues through first hand, face-to-face experiences of working with each other in these conferences. Competency was evaluated, tested and authorized through a network of such field experiences, and authorization depended very much on the judgment of conference directors. A few years ago, however, in the United States, AKRI decided to institutionalize the training, assessment of skills, and the authorization of competence, by installing a formal training program. The purpose was to enable candidates to achieve a recognized level of performance and to be authorized as having “the right to work.” A carefully articulated list of “competencies,” regarded as critical to working effectively in the consultant’s role, was developed. The list was derived from interviews with colleagues most experienced at that time in doing consulting work in group relations conferences. The AKRI Board developed a mentoring system to assist and evaluate candidates’ progress toward being authorized with “the right to work.”

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