

# A TAVISTOCK PRIMER

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Although groups provide the customary setting for human relations training, groups *qua* groups are rarely the main focus of training approaches. Most facilitators seem to regard the group as an aggregate of individuals who cluster together to learn about intrapersonal dynamics or interpersonal relations. Group relations—the dynamics of the group as a whole—are often viewed only as background, the mere context surrounding personal, individual interactions.

This focus on the individual rather than the group derives from some central tenets of the human potential movement: that we as individuals are responsible for our own behavior, that we control our own destiny, that we can make things happen for ourselves. In their eagerness to liberate individuals from the pressures toward conformity imposed by family, community, and institutions, some group workers minimize or ignore the importance of group dynamics. The slogan "You're freer than you think you are" emphasizes free choice, inner control, and self-direction, while it ignores the hidden, sometimes sinister irrational processes that affect individuals in group life.

While Gestalt, encounter, and other approaches celebrate individual uniqueness, the approach known as "group relations," or the Tavistock method, concentrates on the individual only insofar as he or she is manifesting something on behalf of the whole group. This method, named after the renowned British human relations training center where it originated, regards the group as a holistic entity that in some ways is greater than the sum of its parts. The lens of Tavistock theory focuses not on the distinctions between individuals but rather brings into bold relief their commonality of task, function, and motivation; as a consequence, group-level phenomena that are usually invisible become clearer and more distinct. Despite its extraordinary power and theoretical richness, the Tavistock method is not well known or understood in the field of human relations training.

## HISTORY AND ORIGINS

The Tavistock method originated with the work of the British psychoanalyst Wilfred R. Bion. In the late 1940s, Bion conducted a series of small study groups at the Centre for Applied Social Research in London's Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. Bion's previous experience with military leadership training and the rehabilitation of psychiatric patients convinced him of the importance of considering not only the individual in treatment, but also the group of which the individual is a member. Schooled in the psychoanalytic tradition of Melanie Klein, Bion employed her innovative methods of direct, confrontive intervention while working with the study groups and reported his experiences in a series of articles for the journal *Human Relations* (1959). Later published in book form as *Experiences in Groups* (1961), this seminal work stimulated further experimentation at Tavistock and other locations with Bion's novel approach of "taking" a group and viewing it as a collective entity.

Gradually, the approach evolved into a method. In 1957, the Tavistock Institute and the University of Leicester co-sponsored the first group relations conference, a two-week

experiential learning event that focused on the roles that participants assume in work groups. Buttressed by Bion's theory, the conference design also showed the influence of Kurt Lewin and the experimental ideas of the National Training Laboratories in the United States. This first conference led to others.

The conference design began to evolve. Under the guidance of A. Kenneth Rice, chairman of Tavistock's Centre for Applied Social Research and a member of one of Bion's early study groups in 1947-48, the design emphasis shifted from the roles individuals assume in work groups to the dynamics of leadership and authority relations in groups. In his *Learning for Leadership* (1965), Rice stated that the primary task of a group relations conference is to provide participants with opportunities to learn about leadership. More recently, this objective has been redefined as the study of authority and the problems encountered in its exercise. Rice also emphasized the learning that could emerge from studying the conference itself as an institution that transacted with its environment. Rice's views, which echoed Bion's earlier, touchstone hypothesis that individuals cannot be understood—or indeed, changed—outside the context of the groups in which they live, shaped the contours of the group relations conference as a teaching modality.

Under Rice's influence, experiential group work during the 1960s in Great Britain became synonymous with the group relations method; in contrast, experiential groups in the United States during the same period were becoming quite diverse, moving away from the group dynamics focus of the early T-groups and on to personal growth and the study of interpersonal dynamics.

Rice directed all the Tavistock-Leicester conferences from 1962 to 1968. In 1965, he led the first group relations conference in the United States at Mount Holyoke College. This event, co-sponsored by the Washington School of Psychiatry and the Yale University Department of Psychiatry, was supported by Margaret Rioch, Morris Parloff, and F. C. Redlich, who became instrumental in the development of the Tavistock method in the United States.

Currently, training in group relations is provided by the Tavistock Institute in Great Britain and by the A. K. Rice Institute and its affiliated centers in the United States. As seems fitting, no single person can be regarded as the founder of the group relations method, but the founding group would have to include Bion, Rice, and, in the United States, Margaret Rioch. Back (1972) and Rioch (1970) provide historical

## BASIC PREMISES

An aggregate cluster of persons becomes a group when interaction between members occurs, when members' awareness of their common relationship develops, and when a common group task emerges. Various forces can operate to produce a group—an external threat, collective regressive behavior, or attempts to satisfy needs for security, safety, dependency, and affection. Other, more deliberate forces that result in the birth of a group are the conscious choices of individuals to band together to perform a task.

Essential to the Tavistock approach is the belief that when an aggregate becomes a group, the group behaves as a system—an entity or organism that is in some respects greater than the sum of its parts—and that the primary task of the group is *survival*. Although this primary task is frequently disguised or masked, survival as a group becomes the primary preoccupation and latent motivating force for all group members. This emphasis on survival provides the framework for the exploration of group behavior and all the overt and covert manifestations of the primary task.

Appreciating the group as a whole requires a *perceptual shift* on the part of the observer or consultant, a blurring of individual separateness and a readiness to see the

collective interactions generated by group members. Just as a family is "something more" than individual parents and children, just as an organization is "something more" than executives, managers, and line workers, so the group is "something more"; it is a new entity with unique energies and dynamic forces. As Bion (1961) noted, we may observe individual gears, springs, and levers and only guess at the proper function, but when the pieces of machinery are combined, they become a clock, performing a function as a whole, a function impossible for individual parts to achieve.

When individuals become members of a group, behavior changes and a collective identity emerges: a task group, an athletic team, a lynch mob, a utopian community, an organization—all become a new Gestalt in which the group is focal and the individual members become the background. Membership becomes an exciting but ambiguous experience, one that invites individual members to join in the task at hand and also triggers their fantasies and projections about belonging and their conflicts about leadership and authority.

The basic premises of the group-as-a-whole approach can be summarized as follows:

- The primary task of any group is what it must do to survive.
  
- The group has a life of its own only as a consequence of the fantasies and projections of its members.
- The group uses its members in the service of its primary task.
- The behavior of any group member at any moment is the expression of his own needs, history, and behavior patterns *and* the needs, history, and behavior patterns of the group.
- Whatever the group is doing or talking about, the group is always talking about itself, reflecting itself.
- Understanding the process of the group provides group members with heightened awareness and the ability to make previously unavailable choices about their identity and function in a group setting.

These basic premises are common to many theories of group life and group development that employ a regressive, or "whirlpool," model of change (Banes, 1976b). Because Bion (1959) is the principal theorist behind the Tavistock method, a brief description of his theory is provided here.

### **Bion's Theory**

Groups, like dreams, have a manifest, overt aspect and a latent, covert aspect. The manifest aspect is the *work group*, a level of functioning at which members consciously pursue an agreed-upon objective and deliberately work toward the completion of a task. Although group members always have hidden agendas—parts of themselves that they consciously or unconsciously plan *not to* share with the group—they rely on internal and external controls to prevent these hidden agendas from emerging and interfering with the announced group task. With the hidden agendas in check, group members can pool their rational thinking and combine their skills to solve problems and make decisions.

However, groups do not always function rationally or productively, nor are individual members necessarily aware of the kinds of internal and external controls they rely on to maintain the boundary between their announced intentions and their hidden agendas. The combined hidden agendas of group members constitute the latent aspect of group life, the *basic assumption* group. In contrast to the rational, civilized, task-oriented work group, the basic assumption group is comprised of unconscious wishes, fears, defenses, fantasies, impulses, and projections. The work group is focused away from itself, toward

the task; the basic assumption group, by contrast, is focused inward, toward fantasy and a more primitive reality. A tension always exists between the work group and the basic assumption group, a tension usually balanced by various behavioral and psychological structures, including individual defense systems, ground rules, expectations, and group norms.

### Basic Assumptions

On the basic assumption level of functioning, behavior is "as if" behavior: the group behaves *as if* a certain assumption is true, valid, and real and *as if* certain behaviors are *vital* to the group's survival. As Bion (Banes, 1976a) has recently pointed out, both words—"basic" and "assumption"—are important to understanding the term. "Basic" refers to the *survival* motivation of the group; "assumption" underscores the fact that the survival motivation is based, not on fact or reality, but on the collective projections of the group.

Bion identified three distinct types of basic assumptions: dependency, fight/flight, and pairing. Turquet (1974) has added a fourth—oneness.

*Basic Assumption Dependency* The essential aim of this level of group functioning is to attain security and protection from one individual—either the designated leader or a member who assumes that role. The group behaves as if it is stupid, incompetent, or psychotic in the hope that it will be rescued from its impotency by a powerful, God-like leader who will instruct and direct the group toward task completion. When the leader fails to meet these impossible demands, the group members express their disappointment and hostility in a variety of ways. The basic-assumption-dependency function often serves as a lure for a charismatic leader who exerts authority through powerful personal characteristics.

*Basic Assumption Fight/Flight.* In this mode of functioning, the group perceives its survival dependent on either fighting (active aggression, scapegoating, physical attack) or fleeing from the task (withdrawal, passivity, avoidance, ruminating on past history). Anyone who mobilizes the aggressive forces of the group is granted leadership, but the persistent bickering, in-fighting, and competition make most leadership efforts short lived. In flight functioning, leadership is usually bestowed on an individual who minimizes the importance of the task and facilitates the group movement away from the here-and-now.

*Basic Assumption Pairing.* Pairing phenomena include bonding between two individuals who express warmth and affection leading to intimacy and closeness. The pair involved need not be a man and a woman. Such a pair or pairs often provide mutual intellectual support to the extent that other members become inactive. When the group assumes this mode of functioning, it perceives that its survival is contingent on reproduction; that is, in some magic way, a "Messiah" will be born to save the group and help it complete its task.

*Basic Assumption Oneness.* Described by Turquet (1974), this level of functioning occurs "when members seek to join in a powerful union with an omnipotent force, unobtainably high, to surrender self for passive participation, and thereby to feel existence, well-being, and wholeness" (p. 357). The group commits itself to a "movement," a cause outside itself, as a way of survival. Leaders who offer a philosophy of life or methods to achieve higher levels of consciousness become attractive to the group in this type of basic assumption functioning.

The basic assumption life of any group is never exhausted, nor is it imperative for a group to rid itself of its basic assumption characteristics: in fact, as Bion perceived society, certain institutions capitalize on our collective basic assumption strivings and provide structures and vehicles to channel these strong, primitive feelings. Hence, the church

attempts to satisfy dependency needs; the military and industry employ fight/flight motivation; and the aristocracy and the political system—with their emphasis on breeding and succession—build on basic assumption pairing. The current emphasis on mysticism and cosmic consciousness seems to be an **expression of basic assumption oneness**.

Bion's theory is the cornerstone of the Tavistock method: it serves as a framework for the group-as-a-whole approach. Extensions of the theory to work groups and psychotherapy situations are provided by many authors (see the bibliography at the end of this paper).

## THE GROUP RELATIONS CONFERENCE

The Tavistock method can be applied in many different group situations. Primarily intended to teach group dynamics and increase the awareness of group phenomena, the method is formally applied in group relations conferences, events that are characterized by a clear statement of objectives, specific staff roles, and a pervasive, all-encompassing application of the group-as-a-whole theoretical approach. A typical conference brochure might describe the aims and principles of a group relations conference as follows.

"The ability of an individual or of a group to lead effectively is determined in large measure by the way authority is vested in him or it by others. The factors that influence this process can best be understood when they are seen in actual operation. The conference, therefore, offers to its participants an opportunity to study what happens in and among groups at the same time that it is happening. The learning that takes place arises from the direct experience of the participants. The aim is to bring together experience and thought, emotion and intellect, without neglecting one for the other.

"Throughout the conference special attention is paid to the covert processes that operate in and among groups. Unspoken attitudes and behavior patterns may hinder or further group tasks beyond the awareness of those concerned. A greater understanding and heightened awareness of such processes can lead to more effective participation in group activities.

"The conference is open-ended in the sense that there is no attempt to prescribe what anyone shall learn. The focus, however, is on the problems encountered in the exercise of authority. These are major problems in group life of all types and are of particular relevance to the operations and development of effective working relationships within any institution. The conference staff members believe that people who understand something about the nature and exercise of their own authority as well as that of others are thereby equipped to deal more effectively with the tasks of everyday living, with crisis situations and, in particular, with the responsibilities inherent in the leadership of any type of organization.

"The design of the conference is such that a number of aspects of authority can be examined in a variety of contexts. Throughout the conference, the staff encourages examination of all aspects of its own behavior as well as the behavior of the members. Thus the accountability of those individuals exercising delegated, sanctioned, and personal authority is a significant aspect of the conference experience, just as it is a critical aspect of the exercise of authority in all institutional **and organizational settings**.

"It is hoped that the conference experience and later reflection upon its various events will contribute to a capacity for more responsible leadership and followership in the various roles the members occupy in their own institutions. Beyond this, it is recognized that for each participant there is a different set of expectations and a different set of priorities in making use of this learning experience. It is, of course, each member and not the conference staff who must make these determinations."

Conference Design

The current design of a group relations conference is patterned closely after the original design of Rice, who intended to provide participants with experience-based group opportunities wherein their task is "to study their own behavior as it happens " (Rice, 1965, as quoted in Coleman & Bexton, 1975, p. 72). Conference events are structured so that the members have the consultation of at least one staff member to facilitate their task. Role behavior is prescribed for the staff, in order to define its authority structure, its contract with the members, and its internally agreed-upon behavior. However, no rules are made for the members; they are free to experiment with any behavior that they believe will enhance their learning.

Recently, many innovations in Rice's basic design for a group relations conference have been tested, particularly special-focus events to illuminate such group issues as male/female relations, racism, and professional, occupational, and personal role-identity conflicts. However, several events remain consistently in use, and they appear in some combination in most conferences. (See Figure 1.)

*Conference Opening.* In this initial event, the staff and members meet each other as groups. The conference director states the task of the conference, gives some background information, and outlines the structure of the events.

*Study Group (or Small Group).* Eight to twelve members are assigned to a group, usually mixed and balanced for maximum heterogeneity. A particular consultant works with the study group to facilitate its task of examining its own behavior in the here-and- now.

*Large Group.* All members of the conference (typically, fifty to seventy participants) meet together with the task of studying their own behavior in a situation in which face-to-face interaction is problematic or impossible. Two to four consultants, depending on the number of members, are assigned by the conference director to provide consultation to the Large Group's task.

Time	Fri.	Sat.	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.
8:00 Breakfast						
9:00-10:30		SG	SG	SG	SG	CD
10:30 Coffee						
11:00-12:30		LG	LG	LG	AG	AG
12:45 Lunch						
2:30-4:00	2:00 CO SG	IG	IG	IG	—	AG 2:00-3:30
4:00 Tea						
4:30-6:00	LG	IG	IG	IG	CD	
6:45 Dinner						
8:00-9:30	SG	SG	IG	—	AG	

AG = Application Group  
CD = Conference Discussion

CO = Conference Opening  
IG = Intergroup  
— = Free Period

LG = Large Group  
SG = Small Group

Figure 1. A Typical Group Relations Conference

Intergroup Event (IG). There are two traditional intergroup designs:

IO-I. After the director's opening description of the task and the format of the event, members are free to form groups of their own choosing. The task of the event is to study relationships as they happen between and among groups. In order to provide consultation for the intergroup task, staff members are assigned to specific sectors, or rooms, where members may choose to meet.

IO-II. This variation also begins with a description of the event by the director. Members are again free to form groups as they wish. However, the staff is not assigned to specific member work spaces; instead, the staff members meet as a group themselves, in public, so that group members can observe their functioning if they wish. Staff members are available on request to single groups and to intergroup meetings, if consultation is desired.

*Conference Discussion.* This event, which occurs toward the end of the conference, provides an opportunity for all members and staff to discuss the events of the conference. No attempt is made to provide closure or a summary. -

*Application Group.* Small clusters of members are assigned to these groups on the basis of similar back-home responsibilities or interests. The task of the application group is twofold: to further articulate and work toward understanding unresolved conference issues; and to consider the relevance of what was learned at the conference to the members' back-home situations. Each group has an assigned consultant.

Several unique characteristics of the design serve to make temporal and structural boundary concerns highly visible. Time parameters are firmly adhered to—the consultant is present on time and leaves when the announced time limit has elapsed. The structural boundaries are emphasized by the arrangement of chairs for the group event (one circle in the Small Group, three concentric circles in the Large Group) and by specific sectors or rooms for staff and member meetings. The members find it difficult to avoid exploring the significance of the staff's adherence to these boundaries.

### The Consultant's Role

The task of the consultant in a group relations conference is to fulfill a carefully defined role function. The consultant consults only to the group, not to individual members of the group, and only within the time boundaries prescribed. Frequently, the consultant's role is a subject of much consternation among members. The consultant behaves as he- does in the interest of assisting members to pursue the task of the event in which they are involved. His objective is to facilitate the group's task to the exclusion of all other concerns. The consultant does not engage in social amenities, advice-giving, parental nurturance, or direction.

The consultant performs his task by providing interventions for the group's consideration. In a theoretical sense, the consultant "takes" the group by attending to its basic assumption functioning and then reports his observations back to the group. As Rice (1965) describes it, the consultant's job is "to confront the group, without affronting its members; to draw attention to group behavior and not to individual behavior, to point out how the group uses individuals to express its own emotions, how it exploits some members so that others can absolve themselves from the responsibility for such expression" (p. 102).

The consultant has only his experience, his feelings, and his observations to guide him in the task. The consultant may not always be fully conscious of what is happening; at times he may share the panic, anxiety, and bewilderment of the group. However, the consultant consistently attempts to focus what is happening in the group and to present

observations in such a way as to increase the members' awareness of what is happening. Consultant interventions are of several varieties; a few are described here.

*Description* The consultant may simply describe what he sees: that no male members have spoken for the last ten minutes, that the female members are seated opposite the male consultant, that certain words or phrases have become part of the group's language. Such descriptions—unalloyed feedback—call attention to the dynamic configurations of the group.

*Process Observation.* In this type of intervention, the consultant may comment on participation patterns, the development of norms, emotional expression, and other aspects of how the group pursues its task.

*Thematic Development.* Consultants who are attuned to the mythic, archetypal dynamics of the group will cast their interventions in terms of primitive aggression or sexuality that threatens to disrupt the group's task. At times, the group may be re-creating or re-experiencing the primal-horde dynamics of incest or parricide or other symbolic events chronicled in mythology and fairy tales.

*Mondo.* In Zen practice, the teacher often responds to questions with abrupt, pithy remarks designed to produce "instant enlightenment," or *satori*, by calling attention to the obviousness or the absurdity of the question. Some consultants offer similar interventions, designed to shock the group into an immediate awareness of what is happening.

Consultants vary in style and emphasis. They sometimes unwittingly collude with the basic assumption lives of the groups whose examination they are trying to facilitate. Their presence in a role and as a representative of the conference management has high ambiguity for the membership; as Rice (1965, quoted in Coleman & Bexton, 1975, p. 74) points out, "the members inevitably project upon [the staff] their fantasies, fears and doubts about authority and its power." Exploration of the members' projections has the potential to yield significant [earnings regarding authority, power, and responsibility— [earnings for both the staff and members. The role is frequently difficult; strict adherence to it is a hallmark of the Tavistock method.

## Issues Confronting Members

Attending a group relations conference is a unique experience, even for participants who have "made the rounds" of all varieties of human relations training. The seemingly simple structure and the staff behavior of the group relations conference—certainly less elaborate than many other human relations training experiences—create rapid ambiguity for the members. One participant compared his involvement in the Tavistock method to "living inside a Rorschach inkblot for a week." The experience brings into sharp focus the kinds of issues often obscured by other training approaches that feature more personal leadership styles, and it is this sharp focus that makes the method invaluable for those who require an understanding of authority, group dynamics, and the interworkings of group life. If the Tavistock method often produces data overload and feelings of resentment, engulfment, pain, and depersonalization for the group member, it is because authority, power, responsibility, and leadership are difficult issues laden with multiple meanings and bitter memories from the past. Some topics the Tavistock method explores exceptionally well include authority, responsibility, boundaries, projection, organizational structure, and large-group phenomena.

### Authority

Frequently members find themselves confused and anxious over the amount of their individual authority that needs to be delegated to other group members or to the con



sultans in order for the group to accomplish its task. Typically, group members take positions on a continuum that ranges from "I don't know what to do—I wish somebody else would take over" to "To hell with the group! I'm not going to go along with anyone else's ideas because I don't trust them." **Delegated authority is** often experienced as diminished power.

It is precisely in an activity for which the task is specified but the means of accomplishment are to be determined by the members that authority issues surface. In everyday life, such issues remain obscured behind predetermined role relationships, custom, and assumptions about competence. Frequently, authority is vested in individuals because of age, sex, race, rank, education, and other less tangible personal attributes. The events of the conference provide a laboratory for the examination of this phenomenon. For example, in a group composed of health professionals, a physician may be implicitly authorized to marshal the resources of a group, a nurse may be asked to take care of members who are suffering, while the oldest group member or a minority-race member may be set up to challenge the authority of the consultant. These normally unexamined transactions become the occasion for interventions from the consultant.

### Responsibility

Related to authority is the subject of *responsibility*. Because of the nature of the conference events, members have the opportunity to intensely experience the implications of accepting the responsibility for a particular role in the group. For example, a group member who, in real-life situations, is accustomed to challenging authority overtly may never have examined the consequences of that particular function, because the heat of battle has obscured them. Responsibility within a system is everywhere, if it is anywhere, but the implications of that truth are often below the level of awareness.

### Boundaries

Boundaries are both physical and psychological. An individual's skin is a boundary that separates and individuates him or her from others. Internally and externally, various psychological "skins" separate reality and fantasy, thought and impulse, person and function, and one group from another. Boundaries—their types and permeability and the consequences of their absence—are frequent areas of focus in group relations events. A fundamental precept of group relations maintains that work is not possible unless some boundaries that are known to all members are established and maintained. Boundaries must be strong enough to maintain the integrity of what is contained inside, but also permeable enough to allow transactions between the inside and outside environments to occur. As Miller and Rice (1967, as quoted in Coleman & Bexton, 1975) state,

An individual or a group may be seen as an open system, which exists and can exist only through processes of exchange with the environment . . . within our conceptual framework, the individual, the small group, and the larger group are seen as progressively more complex manifestations of a basic structural principle. Each can be described in terms of an internal world, an external environment, and a boundary function that controls transactions between what is inside and what is outside. (p. 52)

The group relations conference staff maintains strict boundary functions in four different areas:

1. *The "Input" Boundary.* The conference director regulates the membership of the conference by requiring members to go through an application and acceptance process.

2. *The Task Boundary.* Each conference event has a specified task that does not overlap with any other.
3. *The Role Boundary.* Staff consultants stay "in role" during the conference and are alert to attempts by the members to seduce them into dropping their role.
4. *The Time Boundary.* All events start and stop on time.

These boundaries and the staffs precise adherence to them protect the members from anxieties that could potentially destroy the work of the conference. As the members observe these boundaries and experience their reactions to them, they have the opportunity to learn about their own boundary maintenance and permeability and whether the boundaries established impede or enhance their work. Boundaries are critical for individuals and groups: a closed system, which refuses to transact with the environment and attempts to nourish itself, becomes frustrated and withdrawn and eventually dies; an open system promises creativity but raises the fear of overextension and loss of identity. Resolution of the dilemma requires a balance between withdrawal and fusion, a balance that requires clarity of perception.

### Projection

Events in the group relations conference present novel and ambiguous stimuli for participants and become the occasion for various projective, disowning, and attributive behaviors. The consultant may be seen as hostile, when in fact the member is experiencing hostility but does not own it. The configuration of the group and the personalities of other group members may prompt transference memories of people and events from the past. These projections do not occur randomly; rather, they are a function of the individual's response to the events at hand and his attraction to various kinds of regressive, primitive behavior.

Projection may diminish personal power—if one attributes his weaknesses to others, he may become adept at giving away his strengths as well. Frequently, participants in the group relations conference experience "de-skilling" and impatience in direct relation to the amount of projection in which they engage.

Projection probably occurs in all human relationships, but as a group phenomenon, it is particularly visible in the group relations conference. It can illuminate such diverse group phenomena as scapegoating, the annihilation of leadership, and the dynamics of power distribution.

### Organizational Structure

In most group work, structure refers to the kinds of control, restraints, and selected emphasis that define the learning environment. Control includes the group's objectives and the contract; restraints are exemplified by group ground rules; the selected emphases derive from the personality of the leader, his expectations and assumptions, the group -theory he espouses, and also from the members and their expectations and assumptions about disclosure, competence, and likeability.

A structure can be minimal or it can be elaborate to a baroque degree; it can also be visible or invisible. Elaborate structures hinder the emergence of group process, while minimal structures encourage its flow. Visible structures inspire high trust, while invisible structures prompt feelings of manipulation. Although of vital importance to productive group functioning, structure and our dependence on it is rarely the object of group consideration.

The group relations conference provides a highly visible but minimal structure. The time schedule, the staff roles, the theoretical perception of the group-as-a-whole, the

arrangement of the chairs, constitute its basics; beyond that, the structure is provided by the members and their projections. The apprehension **that frequently develops in the** conference is due, not to the staffs alleged authority and control, but rather to their absence: it is freedom that frightens. Literally anything can happen in a conference event, and the responsibility for allowing it to happen is shared by all.

The design of the conference permits a participant to examine the structure inside his own head; that is, to explore how individual perceptions and projections attempt to define and control external reality.

### Large-Group Phenomena

People are exposed to large-group phenomena all their lives. At movie theaters, athletic events, political rallies, school assemblies, lecture halls—wherever a large group of persons (more than thirty or so) gathers to pursue a common task—large-group phenomena exist. The experience of being a member of a large group is one of the most common and least understood experiences people have. Group relations conferences that include a Large Group event provide a unique opportunity to explore the experience that some participants describe in the following terms: "Like being at the center of a vortex of rage," "Being alternately overwhelmed with feelings of power and feeling drained and impotent," and "Losing myself and becoming nameless, faceless."

The task of the Large Group event is the same as that of the Small Group: to study its own behavior in the here-and-now. The consultants attempt to facilitate that task by calling attention to group behavior. For example, members frequently attempt to change the seating arrangement (usually three concentric circles) in an attempt to flee from the anxiety the Large Group experience creates in them and to express their fury at the conference staff for putting them in such a situation. Much time can be taken up with discussion about what would be a "better" arrangement. An appropriate intervention from a consultant might be to point out the avoidance aspects of this activity and the implicit challenge to the authority of the staff.

At a recent conference which focused on male/female authority relations, a particular Large Group session was punctuated by the coming and going of individual members in and out of the room. A consultant pointed out that members of the Large Group might be experiencing problems around gender identity in that setting and might be going out to check their gender by physical examination.

Possibly the greatest challenge facing a participant in the Large Group event is to experience and understand what happens to one's own personality boundaries in the face of forces so complex and numerous as to be only partially available for scrutiny.

### CONCLUSION

This primer has attempted to describe the theoretical base from which group relations, or Tavistock, training methods are derived, as well as the objectives and structure of group relations conferences and some common dilemmas they present for participants.

Although not exhaustive in its treatment, the paper gives the reader who has experienced a conference or other training event some aspects of theory that may serve as guideposts to deepen or extend his learning. Those who are seriously interested will want to explore further in both experiential work and theory. **For those who have** had no exposure to group relations methods, this discussion may help clarify what they can **expect from such a training event and whether they want to attend one.** **For the practicing** group facilitator (who may find himself in either of the above situations), the information provided here should help him to understand how group relations training differs in theory, focus, and method from other training that takes place in a group setting.

The usefulness of group relations training, in common with that of other human relations training methods, cannot finally be described or evaluated on paper; the training must be experienced before its measure can be taken.

#### TAVISTOCK: A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Several books on this list are of special value to readers who wish to deepen their understanding of the Tavistock method. Bion's classic work, *Experiences in Groups* (1959), is the major theoretical statement; Margaret Rioch's "The Work of Wilfred R. Bion on Groups" (1970) is an excellent summary of Bion's work and will prepare the reader for Bion's sometimes-difficult text. Miller and Rice's *Systems of Organization* (1967) describes open-systems theory and provides a discussion of task issues and boundary problems. *Learning for Leadership* (1965) is Rice's account of the historical and theoretical development of the group relations conference. In *Group Relations Reader* (1975), Colman and Bexton have collected many hard-to-find papers and excerpts; it is the best single source of information on the Tavistock method and its applications. Also included in this bibliography are a novel, texts from social psychology, a recent interview with Bion, and Thelen's "Reactions to Group Situations Test," which acquaints the reader with basic assumption functioning.

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