

TAVISTOCK REVIEW

**An article for ‘Self and Society’,
(the journal of the association for
humanistic psychology)**

May 1997

By

David Wasdell

**Produced by: The Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High
Street, London E14 0AE**

Web-site: www.Meridian.Org.uk

Hosted by: Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (URCHIN)

Charity Registration No. 284542

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Memories are made of this! Digby Hall in the University of Leicester, home to the annual Tavistock Leicester Conference, was the chosen venue for the combined AHP and AHPP Conference in the spring of 1996. Driving in through the main gates to park under the ancient yew trees opened the doors to a flood of recollections spanning a quarter of a century. The dining hall was new, but all the rest was familiar and the present reality of the AHP was overlaid on a dynamic tapestry of memory. It felt incongruous to find the panelled home of plenary sessions and countless large-group events had been desecrated for use as the bar-lounge. Other rooms refreshed recall of small-group sessions, of inter-group and institutional simulation events, of the familial dynamics of the very-small-group experiences, of review and application groups and of the consultancy-training process.

People react to 'The Tavi' in a host of different ways, almost always expressed as some kind of judgement or critical assessment of the analytic consultant style, of the underlying paradigm or of the design and structure of the training conference. While there is always some element of reality, the response is also and inevitably, a piece of autobiography, an existential mirror to the unconscious of the respondent. It may take the form of an acting-out of unresolved transference, a flight from difficult emotional experience or an inability to cope with the extraordinary complexity of large-group process. Sometimes it is an attempt to preserve fundamental defences and to seek other 'safer' and less challenging ways of working in which significant learning can be avoided in the comfort of unexamined collusion dynamics.

You can imagine my ambivalence, therefore, when I was asked 'to write a humanistic critique of the Tavistock Institute's group relations training, exposing it as an acting out of the collusion defences of psychoanalytic consultancy'. Tavistock training is inevitably and precisely that, but that does not empty it of profound value. Conversely any humanistic group relations training is also an acting out of the collusion defences of the humanistic paradigm expressed through the unconscious processes of the trainers or consultants involved. The assumption that humanistic psychology holds the moral high ground of wholeness, integration and perfection of consciousness from which it can sit in judgement on others, is arrogant in the extreme. It is fraught with the dynamics of idealisation and denial, displacement and projection more in keeping with the ethos of religious fundamentalism than commitment to reality-testing, learning and rigorous application of appropriate scientific method to the world of the human psyche. We do well to pay attention to the beam in the observing eye of humanistic psychology before attempting to identify the sawdust in the perceptions of psychoanalysis.

The as-yet-unresolved unconsciousness of each of us exercises a profoundly formative role in shaping the dynamics and processes of our practice and in the selection of paradigm and the construction of theoretical concepts used to provide

understanding of our work. It also governs our selection of professional association or peer-group, and under-girds the set of collusional relationships with which we seek to defend our unconsciousness, preserve our innocence and avoid transformative learning. The boundaries of consciousness represent the limits of competence, the edge of the learning agenda. The most intense collusional processes of repression and denial focus around the most common unconscious content. Here the defences of the analyst and analysand, of therapist and client, of trainer or consultant and group or organisation, coincide and overlap with the common social defences of our civilisation. It is, therefore, those unresolved unconscious processes embedded in the major schools of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy and enacted in the splitting, judgement and defensive displacement which emerge at their boundaries, which offer a royal road into the residual unconscious dynamics of the self and of the society of which every self is a member.

Any evaluation of the Tavistock Human Relations Training which I may offer is, therefore, inevitably subjective and autobiographical, exposing some of my own unconscious process for the examination of others. It also offers the possibility of stimulating defensive projection and reaction on the part of those readers who wish to preserve their own unconscious defences by judging my position against the background of some preconceived orthodoxy. My paranoia is undeniable, yet rooted in the (for me) reality of painful experience over the years with people whom I had naively assumed to be fellow-travellers in the pursuit of truth.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

My experience of the Group Relations Training Programme of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations consists of three of the fortnight-long Leicester conferences spaced three or four years apart, and interspersed with some small-group training at the Tavistock Institute in London. The experiential learning was backed up by extensive reading in the field of group-analytic and psycho-analytic literature, by on-going dialogical relationships with some of the leading group consultants and by a programme of creative writing. On the practical side, I have led, facilitated and consulted to many thousands of hours of experiential group-work, each of which has been recorded and reviewed. In addition I have had the experience of founding, designing, directing and evolving a consultancy-research unit over a period of twenty-five years, and of directing a series of consultancy-training conferences. I have also had the privilege of working at the leading edge of psychoanalytic research within the international community and struggling with the dynamic interface between psychoanalytic insight and our understanding of the behaviour of groups and social systems. Today I find myself aware of a more extensive shoreline of unconsciousness, while paradoxically learning at a faster rate than at any other time in my adult life.

The programme of the Leicester conferences is designed to provide participants with the opportunities to explore the dynamics of small groups, inter-group and institutional processes and the complex phenomena of life in the large group. There are issues of power and authority, leadership and followership, membership and

dependency, boundaries, rebellion and conformity, creativity and the spontaneous generation of group-mythology. Gender and sexuality, prejudice and racism, culture and class, role and religion, politics and ideology, all play their part in the dynamic web of interactive process. Family dynamics and the projection and transference of intra-personal unconscious phantasy surface as the ground of inter-personal relationships, aggregated upwards into the macro-dynamics of social systems.

The design of the training conference has evolved over time while preserving stability of well-tried elements. The opening and closing plenaries provide opportunities to explore the dynamics of joining and leaving the event, of the taking up of varied roles in membership, consultancy and management, and for the examination of the boundary between the inside and the outside of a temporary educational institution. The small group of about ten participants with a designated consultant, allocated location and named membership offers opportunities to experience and reflect on the interpersonal dynamics and the behaviour of the face-to-face group as a whole. In similar vein but at a different level of aggregation, the large group event brings the total conference membership together with a designated team of consultants to study the phenomena of behaviour when the intimacy of face-to-face relationships is no longer sustainable. With good-enough containment, the large group becomes a crucible in which alliance-building and inter-sector conflict emerge. Paranoid phantasies of crowd behaviour, power-struggles and the experience of impotence, despair and passivity are interlaced with the use of imagery and mythology in an attempt to comprehend the enormous information overload. While surging waves of emotion can sweep through the group, cognitive content weaves in and out of coherence and fragmentation whilst the consultants seek to reflect and interpret the powerful processes of group-transference to which they are exposed.

The inter-group event provides a context to explore the dynamics of spontaneous sector formation and the complex evolving interactions between the sub-groups with all the resonance of political process and institutional complexity. In this event the consultants are present in designated rooms reflecting on the process of the sub-group fragments which pass through their space. On the other hand, in the institutional event the consultant team is constituted as an event-management group from which member sub-sections can attempt to negotiate consultative resources. The proceedings of the management group are open to observation as they seek to identify the dynamic processes in play within the institutional simulation, and raise them to member consciousness by generating working hypotheses and interpretative interventions. Mirroring between the intra-group process of the management team and the inter-group process of the membership sectors is profound, and raises the whole area of projection and introjection in the dynamics of institutional life.

Small review and application groups of half a dozen members with the services of a facilitator provide a break from the intensity of experiential learning. They offer an opportunity to reflect on the personal experience of the events, to try and make sense of the dynamic phenomena and to begin the task of applying the learning to professional life outside the boundaries of the training conference. In my experience, these have been the least effective of the design elements and much more

consideration needs to be given to defining and developing the role and skills of facilitation.

Some conferences run in two parallel sections, one composed of members attending for the first time, the other comprising all those who have attended at least one previous conference. The two sub-conference groups are kept separate for the first week then merged at the start of week two, so providing opportunities to explore the dynamics of differentiation and integration, confluence and engulfment characteristic of organisational mergers in corporate life. Another innovation has been the occasional introduction of very-small-group events in which four or five participants work with a consultant on the intense affective relationships of familial dynamics. Every few years a consultancy training group is offered as part of the Leicester Conference. The training group has its own director and consultant staff and operates as a sub-group of the conference as a whole. It has its own small-groups and large-group event while members also take part as supervised trainee consultants in other events of the conference. The training group terminates before the end of the main conference, so providing opportunities to experience the dissolution of group boundaries and the task of individuation under conditions of extremely fluid role definition.

Personally, I took to the medium of intensive experiential learning like a duck to water. Each of the three Leicester conferences was a life-transforming event. On each occasion within six months to a year my whole professional career had been re-structured, beliefs and ideological patterns were radically re-ordered, cognitive learning and process skills developed to new levels and personal relationships underwent significant change. I find myself looking back to those six weeks in Digby Hall as among the most profound and valued learning experiences of my whole life, surpassed only by my experience of the consultancy-formation and advanced human relations training events of the Meridian Programme itself.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Over the last thirty-five years the Tavistock Leicester Conference has come to be recognised internationally as the flagship of psychoanalytically-oriented group-relations training. Put simply, it is the best in its field in the world. During the last decade and a half, however, it has begun to show signs of paying the price of success in terms of defensive inertia, difficulties in coming to terms with advances in psychological research and resistance to change in its dynamics and design.

The theoretical paradigm underlying the Tavistock Model owes much to the work of W.R. Bion with development and application by A.K. Rice, E. Miller, P. Turquet and G. Lawrence. Bion in turn depended on the research and writing of Melanie Klein and Sigmund Freud. At its heart lies a construct which is based on individual therapeutic analysis with individuals perceived as mentally ill. This locus inevitably limits the appropriateness of paradigm when applied not to individuals, but to group and social phenomena, not therapeutically in conditions of illness, but to the training of emotionally competent professionals. A paradigm which has emerged from the

study of individual deviance is inadequate when used as a framework of understanding for those common unconscious processes and defences which drive the dynamics of groups and social systems.

Since the mid-1960s, major advances in the field of psychoanalytic research have been made within the international community. Today it is widely recognised that learning is a continual process from vegetative cellular life through embryonic and foetal development and on via full-term uterine experience and the trauma of birth into the nursing relationship and beyond. Those common defences and ‘paranoid-schizoid mechanisms’ seen as innate, instinctive and part of the unalterable datum of human being within the classical paradigm are now perceived to be learned responses to common experiences within the pre- and peri-natal field of human life. The implications of this paradigm shift are immense. Firstly it provides the missing link, building a bridge between our understanding of individual psychodynamics and the common processes of social systems. Secondly, the recognition that the common psychotic defences are not instinctive but learned enables us to go beyond the despairing fatalism of ‘instinctive’ theory in which raising awareness of unchangeable processes and the development of coping mechanisms is the best that can be hoped for. Here instead is a solid foundation for the transformative development of human potential, for new dimensions of individual integration, for the deconstruction of social defences against anxiety and their associated institutions, for a new understanding of group and social dynamics, and ultimately for a process of social renewal that reaches to the very roots of our civilisation.

The Tavistock Institute, in common with the establishment of British psychoanalysis, has as yet shown little sign of coming to terms with this paradigm shift. The challenge now is to develop a model of group-relations training that builds on the best of the past, is coherent with the leading edge of psychological research and combines continual reflexive learning with best available practice. The turbulent conditions of the next millennium demand that we reach out creatively in response to this challenge and avoid the temptation to stay fixated in the collusional back-waters of yesterday’s orthodoxy, whether psychoanalytic or humanistic.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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