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Searching for Group Relations

When I took up my post as a *visiting social scientist* at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in August 2003, I found myself in an organization that seemed both depressed and anxious about its past, and yet transitioning and hopeful, in search of its future. The organization felt depressed, because it seemed as if Institute staff knew their days of innovation in applied psychodynamic thinking in organizations were largely over, and anxious, because they were worried that the mythology of the Institute would be shattered when the world found out. The halo surrounding the Institute's founding and interdisciplinary innovation in group study which was the product of the work of such scions as Wilfred R. Bion, Harold Bridger, Elliot Jaques, Isabel Menzies Lyth, John D. "Jock" Sutherland, Eric L. Trist and A. T. M. "Tommy" Wilson and later A. Kenneth Rice, Pierre M. Turquet and Eric J. Miller, appeared to have faded. At the same time, the Institute had launched a process, which led, before my departure in June 2004, to a proposed restructuring of its design and revision of its corporate plan.

As I reflected on these forces pushing and pulling in competing directions, I wondered whether a shift away from the quest for what Eric J. Miller called "an ultimate unifying theory of human behavior"ⁱ had occurred at the Tavistock Institute, and whether

other organizations similar to it, such as National Training Laboratories and A. K. Rice Institute, had experienced similar things. Were there any common processes explaining the dynamics of change in organizations originally founded to study group behavior and enhance the democracy of society and organizational life? What factors interfered with their quest to improve people's quality of life? In particular, what dynamics limited change-oriented organizations' ability to sustain innovation?

Tapping Secrets

The Tavistock Institute I encountered in London in 2003 had few researchers on staff interested in exploring the psychodynamics of organizational life or expanding group relations theories and methods. In fact only one full-time Institute employee, Group Relations Programme Director Mannie Sher, had any significant experience in the field of group relations.ⁱⁱ It felt to me as if the organization held a secret—that the Tavistock group relations tradition of applying psychodynamic thinking to groups and organizations was no longer actively being evolved at the Institute—and it seemed that the burden of keeping this secret created a constant, yet unacknowledged, undertow in the psyche of the organization. And as with all secrets, the challenge to keep the information hidden overshadowed any curiosity about its demise.

Although, like me, many current Institute staff members were not alive at the height of the Institute's innovative post-World War II years, they remained aware of the powerful historical legacy and brand-name recognition the Institute still carried in the area of group study. Yet many appeared conflicted about investigating Tavistock's group relations theories and methods further. The idea that becoming familiar with a variety of perspectives, including psychodynamic principles and a deeper understanding of group

behavior, in order to select the most appropriate methods for organizational research and consultancy did not seem to resonate as a viable option. Instead, the prevailing organizational culture seemed to require that people choose a social science approach and dogmatically adhere to it. Given the few staff left who confessed to support it, group relations was obviously the riskiest choice.

Younger Institute staff members were quite vocal about their lack of interest in group relations. Indeed few current staff had ever attended the Institute's own group relations events. When I asked if they were curious about the Institute's annual conference at the University of Leicester, colloquially known as the *Leicester Conference*ⁱⁱⁱ or simply *Leicester*, many staff smiled and replied "it's not for me," they were "thinking about doing it sometime," or "I might do a shorter one," even though the Institute provided time off for staff to attend, free of charge. One staff member sheepishly asked me over a cup of tea in the staff room one afternoon, "You seem pretty normal. Why do you like that stuff?"

In November 2003, I rode the train from London to Oxford to conduct my second interview with Isabel Menzies Lyth in her home in the village of Iffly. Born in 1917, Menzies Lyth was active in the War Office Selection Board and Civil Resettlement Units during and after World War II, the same units from which many of the founders of the Tavistock Institute hailed. After the war, she joined the others who launched the Institute in 1947 and began Kleinian psychoanalytic training because "*everyone* was doing it at the time." Menzies Lyth fondly recalled her work with many of the great Kleinian analysts of the time, including her second analysis, "the one for myself" she called it, with Bion, and supervision of her first child case by Melanie Klein.^{iv}

Menzies Lyth's seminal research on nurses and the identification of social systems as a defense against anxiety built on Elliot Jaques previous study at Glacier Metal and remains one of the most cited studies in social science literature. Having worked at the Institute for nearly thirty years, between 1946 and 1975, Menzies Lyth had witnessed its evolution over a critical period of its history. I was eager to continue the conversation we had started during my dissertation research in January 2002.

To my American eyes, Menzies Lyth's house seemed the picture of English country living. As I entered her immaculately tended garden through a heavy wooden gate and knocked on the front door a light mist imperceptively dampened the day. An intellectually spry and witty woman of eighty-five years, Menzies Lyth greeted me cheerfully and we soon fell into easy conversation on a range of topics. Although she has physical difficulty walking long distances, Menzies Lyth's mental capacity remains amazingly lucid, especially about the details of events that occurred decades ago. It was a wonderful treat for a social historian like me to have access to such a wealth of first hand information. Our conversation moved easily from one topic to the next and I exchanged the role of interviewer for that of informant at those times Menzies Lyth became eager for current information from the field.

During one particularly interesting role exchange, Menzies Lyth described her sense of having been "so lucky" to work at the Institute because it was "constantly exciting," a "terrific place" full of "near geniuses" who, through the luxury of large grants in the early years, spent much of their time in lively conversation about the future of society in the post-war period and their Institute's emerging role within in it. She called her time there "hugely exciting" and I listened in rapt, if not envious, attention to

her spirited descriptions of a by-gone era, so unlike what I had encountered in 2003-2004. At a natural pause in our discussion Menzies-Lyth, who knew of my appointment, inquired “So how are *you* getting on at the Institute?” I felt the interviewee role slip off her shoulders and onto mine as I pondered how best to answer this question. In the end, I did what all informants in an awkward situation do: I evaded. I described how kind and helpful everyone at the Institute had been, how I had an office and was settling right in. Undeterred, Menzies Lyth persisted with even more curiosity, “But, how are you *getting on*—what are you *doing*?”

Why was I reluctant to speak my mind? Who was I trying to protect—Menzies Lyth from disappointment, the Tavistock Institute from embarrassment, the field of group relations from ridicule or myself from becoming the Cassandra^v of group relations? All these concerns were alive in that moment.

I realized that when I made my pilgrimage from Southern California to London, I had come with a phantasy, a Tavistock-Institute-in-the-mind that did not in reality exist. My phantasy was that I would write a book about the exciting things happening in the group relations field, the innovative application of psychodynamic thinking to workplace issues, and the evolution of new theoretical social science perspectives that I imagined continued to occur at the Tavistock Institute. Unfortunately, I did not find much data to support this perspective. Instead I found a field, and an organization, in transition.

By the look on Menzies-Lyth’s face, I think she was more disappointed than shocked when I described my experiences. She asked whether there was not any talk about group relations or the psychodynamics of organizations going on at the Institute

any more. Sadly, I reported, there were few conversations like that happening regularly at the Institute, certainly nothing like the exciting things she had described.^{vi}

“But where has it gone?” she exclaimed.

“That is what I want to know!” I replied.

The Perennial Dilemma

In November 2003 a group relations event, co-sponsored by the Tavistock Institute and OFEK, an Israeli group relations organization, was held in Italy. Its purpose was to explore the theory, design, roles and application of group relations conferences. Reflecting on the meeting, its organizers, Avi Nutkevitch and Mannie Sher, noted one significant theme which emerged throughout was “whether the Tavistock-Leicester model was actually out of date or whether it contained the basic elements from which adaptations and new learning events could be built.”^{vii} The “perennial dilemma,” Nutkevitch and Sher suggested, was whether the Tavistock-Leicester model was “dead or dying...or...alive and well.”^{viii} And, if in fact, the Tavistock Institute was no longer evolving the group relations tradition, “which countries and group relations organizations now held the mantle of leadership and innovation?”^{ix} Could individuals from different backgrounds and perspectives successfully work together and be judged equally competent to carry the tradition?

These questions resonated with my own concern to investigate the history of the field of group study and the organizations associated with it, not only to explore the changes that had occurred, but to try to explain what dynamics undergirded them. Without this analysis, it would be impossible to address the question of whether the Tavistock model remained alive and relevant or had reached its expiration point.

The answers I have discovered in writing this book indicate that it is time to push past such dualistic, either/or thinking about change and recognize that institutes of group study—what I call *idea organizations*—experience periods of vitality *and* morbidity, of growth, decline *and* stasis, as part of their natural life cycle. The history of the field of group study is a history of both expansion and contraction; contained within it are both “the seeds of its own destruction”^x and renewal. As this history demonstrates, each of the organizations studied has experienced conflicts so intense that the survival of the organization has been imperiled. Yet, in each case these same conflicts have created opportunities for organizational renewal, which has led to new discoveries and experiments whenever members have been able to set aside their personal predilections and think about the group-as-a-whole.

ⁱ Miller, 1989, p. 7.

ⁱⁱ Other Institute members, such as *Associates* Karen Izod and Angela Eden along with *Advanced Organisational Consultation* faculty Richard Holti, Jean Neumann and Sue Whittle, were actively working with group relations techniques, yet were not full-time Tavistock Institute employees.

ⁱⁱⁱ See appendix A.

^{iv} I. Menzies Lyth, personal communication, November 17, 2003.

^v Cassandra was a mythological character who was given the gift of prophetic power by a smitten admirer named Apollo. When Cassandra rejected Apollo’s advances, he retaliated by decreeing that although she would have vision and prophecies no one would believe her.

^{vi} A *UK and Ireland Group Relations Development Forum*, first initiated by Mannie Sher in 2000, occurs approximately every six months to “provide an informal space for discussion of current issues and work in progress” as a way to “foster collaboration between organizations,” Karen Izod noted. This was one way the application of psychodynamic thinking in organizational life and group relations theories and methods continues to be discussed at the Tavistock Institute. In addition, a website, www.grouprelations.com, was established “as a vehicle for organizations to market their conferences and enter into debate” (K. Izod, personal communication, June 3, 2004.)

^{vii} Nutkevitch & Sher, forthcoming, p. 6.

^{viii} *Ibid*, p. 8.

^{ix} *Ibid*, p. 7.

^x *Ibid*, p. 9.