

## **Director's Report: On Line Group Relations Conference**

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I. Introduction: As the director of the first on line group relations conference (GRC), I offer this report entirely from my own perspective. I will offer my understanding of the history of the conference, the pre-conference staff work and a summary of the process of the conference itself. While I describe my own background in order to provide the reader with enough data to understand the biases that I may be introducing into this report, I am respecting the anonymity of staff and members. Therefore, although the conference was rich in the typical dynamics and themes which emerged in the work of the staff and the members (authority relations and their derivative expression in age, gender, race, ethnicity, professional affiliation and other differentiating characteristics), most of the data that I offer here is designed to demonstrate the similarities and differences between face to face and online group relations work.

II. History of the conference: I have been engaged in group relations conference work as a staff consultant for more than twenty years, and I am directing my fifth face to face conference in the Tavistock tradition this year. I have become interested in group processes on line in the last ten years, having developed a web site with a chat room where I have conducted staff meetings for pre-conference staff work and post-conference reviews. The chat room provides an opportunity for interaction in real time; thus most of my experience with these on line group processes had been in real time until 2005.

A colleague informed me in October 2005 of a seminar on group process in cyberspace. I contacted the person, A., who was running the seminar, and he invited me to participate as a means of becoming acquainted with each other's work (I later asked him to become my Assistant Director for Administration of the on line conference). The seminar was conducted from October to December, 2005 in a bulletin board format; therefore comments were posted by members asynchronously and the board functions 24/7. Though I was initially skeptical about the potential for a meaningful group process to emerge without at least some contact in real time, I was also aware of the degree of surprise/disbelief about the presence of relevant group process that I have encountered in a chat room where face to face contact is absent. My experiences in this initial seminar, and a subsequent one during February to April 2006 that I participated in, convinced me that further exploration would be useful.

During the same time period, another colleague suggested that I contact a psychologist who offers on line seminars for continuing education (also in a bulletin board, asynchronous format). While this psychologist had never offered an "experiential" seminar, he had attended a couple of group relations conferences more than ten years ago, and was intrigued enough to agree to have one of my students and me as co-consultants to a small process group. This student of mine and I consulted to such a group of twelve members during May 2006 and the success of this event led to my willingness to direct the first on line group relations conference.

Some major points of learning from this small group process seminar are as follows:

- 1) A sufficient number of colleagues are interested in the phenomenon of group processes in cyberspace to engage as members of group relations conferences, 2) Observable behavior in this environment includes whether a member posts a comment, when the comment is posted, the

content of the comment and “slips of the keyboard.” 3) Consulting to such an asynchronous group process entails responding to members’ comments as if the comments were being made at the same time that they are being read by the consultant, though the real timing of the comments’ posting is also available as data. Even though the consultant may be checking for new messages once or twice a day, the consultant trusts that the timing of a consultation can be discerned by referring to the consultant’s internal experience, rather than to a temporally defined experience.

Having maintained contact with A., I was now ready to work on the development of a full on line group relations conference. Staff members were recruited from colleagues known either to A. or myself (J.). Because A. had no experience in face to face conference work, I suggested that he might take the role of Assistant Director of Administration, with the condition that he attend a prior five day residential GRC. Staff members that were known to me included my own mentor in GRC work, B., and colleagues from Washington, DC, K., and Mexico, S. I also asked colleagues from Chicago, Q., and Israel, O., to serve on the administrative team. All of the staff members who were known to me had worked with me on prior face-to-face GRC’s. A. helped me contact the other members of the staff through his network. These staff members reflected international roots: G. from India, N. from Spain, I. from Israel and M. from Peru. I had also interviewed three other potential staff consultants, one from the US, one from South Africa and one from Ghana who ultimately did not join as staff members.

III. Pre-conference staff work began at the conference web site on July 1, 2006. Among the issues that arose early in the staff work was my designation of certain consultants as senior (B., K. and S.). I asked B. and S. to co-lead the small group team, and K. to work with me on the large group team. G., N., I. and M. would work as small group consultants. M. and N. were vocal about challenging the hierarchical nature of the authority structure in the conference.

This challenge may have been related to their both coming from a center that uses more of an Institutional Transformation model than the model of group relations from AKRI that I have been schooled in.

Soon thereafter, a challenge emerged between B. and G. about the senior-junior split. Significantly, with B. being my mentor and G. being of the same ethnicity as my Assistant Director for Administration, we already had an indication of the staff group enacting covert conflicts between A. and me. Such symptoms of splitting within the staff became heated enough that B. posted comments indicating uncertainty about his capacity to work within the staff. The dynamics of staff's and members' withdrawing from the conference would be active, explicitly and behaviorally, throughout the pre-conference staff work and the conference itself.

Difficulty with working in the on line environment was a consistent theme. Staff members were aware from the outset that technical difficulties were available as a displacement from the examination of covert group process. As the chronologically oldest staff member, B. also became the repository for the experience of technical challenges in using the conference bulletin board format. In spite of these challenges, staff collaboratively produced a conference brochure after securing appropriate authorization from the sponsoring organizations. Within two weeks of beginning our work, we set up separate threads on the board for large group, small group and administrative teams to meet. Initially I took the role of observer to the small group team, which I later realized set a tone of boundarilessness to the team meetings. Later, during the conference opening in the staff thread, I stated my intention not to observe the small group team or the small groups themselves.

Towards the end of July, as we were completing the brochure, war was again starting to occur in northern Israel. I. (the staff member) apparently released a draft of the brochure

prematurely to colleagues in Israel, and recognized the implicit challenge therein to my authority. The war also may have been represented in our conference staff in the conflict between the two major factions of the staff represented by A. and me.

With the electronic distribution of the brochure accomplished by August 1, the staff worked diligently to recruit a membership. A. attended (but did not complete) a five-day residential group relations conference, and reported to the staff that he had left that conference a day early. I did not explore the connection between A.'s premature departure from that conference and B.'s threat to resign from the staff. I also received e-mail communications from A. and B. at different times, both before and during the conference. Some of these communications I asked to be posted in the thread where staff was meeting, but I was not sufficiently rigorous about this boundary. Thus the dynamic of staff members' leaving prematurely was not sufficiently examined or worked with. Likewise, the usual concerns about "seducing" members across the boundary into the conference, which probably related to anxiety about having a membership sufficient for a conference, arose in the process of recruiting the membership.

As these recruiting efforts yielded a membership of 14, much below our anticipated 48 members, anxiety increased among the staff. A. offered some suggestions such as creating a research task for the conference, and asking some of the staff to register as members, which provoked another round of hostile reaction, particularly between A. and B. My own interventions during this pre-conference staff work were aimed at maintaining cohesion in the staff group. Much of my energy was dedicated to protecting A. from the scapegoat role that he attracted with some consistency and to confronting B. on his reactivity to A.'s naiveté and B.'s perception of my failure to manage A.'s work role.

Another source of anxiety among the staff as the conference opening approached concerned the security of our meeting space. Paranoid fears that members would have access to staff meeting space persisted through the first half of the conference, particularly as members reflected staff dynamics in a manner that is common in face to face conferences. The staff did not seem aware that these fears of intrusion might represent projections of our own intrusions into each other's work. In preparation for the conference opening, the administrative team set up a new thread for their staff work. A summary of the topic titles (threads) and the number of comments (replies) and times each thread was viewed by the staff is available in Table 1. The number of comments posted by each staff member in the opening comments thread is listed in Table 2.

An immediate observation drawn from Table 1 is that the number of times each thread was viewed is about ten times the number of posts in each thread. This ratio is quite consistent throughout the conference work. This ratio highlights the obvious phenomenon in our work with groups that staff and members are much more active in processing incoming information than their overt participation in making comments would indicate. I suggest that variations from this ratio may also be significant indications of lurking (observing without more active or verbal participation) or passive, somewhat withdrawn participation (only observing for the purpose of posting a message).

Compare the difference between the number of posts in the small group team forum and that in the large group team forum. Since the small group team consisted of six staff members, most of whom had never worked together, they used much more time and energy developing a working relationship than the large group team, whose active consultants (K. and myself) had several opportunities to work on a face to face large group team in earlier

conferences. Table 2 shows the number of posts from each staff member on the opening comments thread where we conducted our pre-conference work. These data highlight another important difference between working face to face and working online. In the online work, all of the data in the form of comments from staff and members are available in the same form without recourse to the differences in the ways in which we ordinarily process and record information with our individual memories. Table 2 illustrates a simple example of this difference; in face to face conferences the amount of space taken up by any staff or member may be perceived very differently. In working online, the number of times a person posts is immediately accessible as data. Note that A. posted more than twice as many comments as any other staff member in the pre-conference work, followed by B. and S., the two co-leaders of the small group team. In my experience of working online, quantity of material is seldom effective in conveying information, and may actually undermine the exercise of authority, which is why my own number of posts falls closer to the mean. Of course, posting less frequently does not itself generate authority, and the higher frequency of posts by B. and S. may reflect the increased responsibility that I delegated to them as leaders of the small group team.

**Table 1 - Staff Work Threads**

<b>Topic Title</b>	<b>Replies</b>	<b>Views</b>
<b>Opening Comments</b>	394	5203
<b>General Staff Forum</b>	442	4762
<b>Small Group Team</b>	456	3684
<b>Large Group Team</b>	13	132
<b>Admin Team Forum</b>	245	2568
<b>Review and Application Group</b>	78	523

**Table 2 – Opening Comments (Staff)**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>A</b>	131	33
<b>B</b>	56	14
<b>S</b>	38	10
<b>J</b>	34	9
<b>I</b>	28	7
<b>M</b>	25	6
<b>G</b>	22	6
<b>O</b>	18	5
<b>Q</b>	16	4
<b>N</b>	14	4
<b>K</b>	13	3

IV. The conference began on September 18, 2006 with fourteen members. Membership demographics: five males and nine females, five from the United States (all women), four from India (two male and two female), two from Canada (one male and one female), one male from the United Kingdom, one male from China and one female from Spain. I decided to divide the membership into two small groups, A and B, each having two consultants and one observer assigned. I also changed the schedule, omitting the Institutional Event, so that members would experience small group, large group (all of the members with K. and myself consulting), IV, and Review and Application Group (two separate groups with two consultants each). The revised schedule is listed in Table 3. Group A had S. as senior consultant working with I. as

co-consultant and M. as observer. Group B had B. as senior consultant working with N. as co-consultant and G. as observer. Large group was observed by A. A summary of the topic titles (threads) and the number of comments (replies) and times each thread was viewed by the staff and members is available in Table 4.

**Table 3- Revised Conference Schedule**

September 19-24 Small Group 1  
 September 25-30 Large Group 1  
 October 1-6 Small Group 2  
 October 7-12 Large Group 2  
 October 13-18 Review and Application Group 1  
 October 19-24 Small Group 3  
 October 25-30 Large Group 3  
 October 31- Nov 5 Small Group 4  
 November 6-11 Large Group 4  
 November 12-17 Review and Application Group 2  
 November 18 Live Plenary Conference Review

**Table 4- Member Work Threads**

<b>Topic Title</b>	<b>Replies</b>	<b>Views</b>
<b>Small Group A</b>	88	1430
<b>Small Group B</b>	221	2587
<b>Large Group</b>	295	3012
<b>RAG 1</b>	68	629
<b>RAG 2</b>	73	716
<b>Admin Team Forum</b>	47	580

<b>Member Lounge</b>	22	208
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Table 4 illustrates a seldom-documented aspect of group relations work. Note the difference in number of posts (one third) and views (one half) in small group A compared to small group B. The ratio of view to replies in small group A is 16:1, which may indicate a more passive group, both in terms of making comments and using their energy for observation. This ratio in small group B is 12:1, with a higher degree of participation. The degree of participation and the ratio of views to replies were similar these ratios in the large group. Participation in the review and application groups was also quite uniform, if not as active as small group B or large group, probably due to the shorter period of time (by half) devoted to review and application.

### **Table 5- General Staff Forum**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>A</b>	133	30
<b>B</b>	74	17
<b>S</b>	42	9
<b>M</b>	38	9
<b>J</b>	35	8
<b>I</b>	34	8
<b>G</b>	31	7
<b>K</b>	24	5
<b>O</b>	15	3
<b>Q</b>	11	2
<b>N</b>	6	1

Table 5 shows the participation of the staff in the general staff forum where staff members worked during the conference. Note by comparing Table 2 to Table 5 that the absolute amount of participation and the relative participation of different staff remained relatively stable between the pre-conference and conference work (two months of pre-conference work followed by two months of conference work). This finding is consistent with the stability of roles that we generally find in face-to-face groups; the amount of space taken up by a group member is likely determined by their role and valence for containing or expressing various group tensions. Table 6 shows the participation of the small group team in the thread that they used during the

conference (note that the general staff forum and the small group team threads **were not** accessible to the membership). Note the high degree of participation by S. and B., which may have been overdetermined by my designating them as senior, although it might be naïve to assume that external designation is more potent a stimulus than internal motivation, especially in group relations work, where the unconscious more likely to lie behind some behavior than a “rational” process like staff designations. I. (the staff member who co-consulted with S. to small group A) was similarly active.

**Table 6- Small Group Team (Staff)**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>S</b>	129	28
<b>B</b>	123	27
<b>I</b>	109	24
<b>N</b>	37	8
<b>M</b>	31	7
<b>G</b>	21	5
<b>A*</b>	3	1
<b>J*</b>	2	0
<b>Q</b>	2	0

\*not on team

Tables 7 and 8 show the activity in small groups A and B. Each of these threads was continuous throughout the conference, thus members and staff could review the comments from preceding sessions of the group. In small group A, the two most active members were a male and female pair, who may have mirrored the male and female pair of co-consultants. This pair was also composed of one member from Great Britain and one from the U.S., thus also perhaps mirroring the parentage of Tavistock group relations as realized in this conference. Note that the relative amount of space taken up by consultants’ comments in this group A approximates the Director’s degree of participation in the staff meetings, both before and during the conference. In small group B, by contrast, three female members are most active, with the senior male

consultant B. posting three times as many comments as his female co-consultant N. While members' activity was quite differentiated in terms of quantity and quality, all members did participate to some degree in the small groups. However, S. has alerted me that the two least active members of Small Group A were minimally involved to the point that S. did not experience them as truly participating.

**Table 7- Small Group A**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Z</b>	26	29
<b>V</b>	21	24
<b>Y</b>	9	10
<b>F</b>	8	9
<b>I*</b>	6	7
<b>W</b>	5	6
<b>S*</b>	5	6
<b>E</b>	4	4
<b>T</b>	4	4
<b>A*</b>	1	1

\*Staff

**Table 8- Small Group B**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>C</b>	46	21
<b>H</b>	36	16
<b>D</b>	35	16
<b>X</b>	24	11
<b>U</b>	21	9
<b>B*</b>	20	9
<b>R</b>	19	9
<b>L</b>	14	6
<b>N*</b>	6	3
<b>A*</b>	1	0

\*Staff

Table 9 shows the activity of the members and consultants in large group, and Tables 10 and 11 show the activity of members and consultants in the review and application groups. Not surprisingly, the members who posted most frequently in their small groups were also the most active in the large group. The three active women from small group B (C., H. and D.) accounted for 39% of the comments in large group. The female-male pair from small group A (Z. and V.) accounted for 19% of the comments. These members also were disproportionately active in their review and application groups. RAG 1 had 31% of its comments by V., D. and C., and RAG 2 had 29% of its comments by H. and Z.

**Table 9- Large Group**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>H</b>	48	16
<b>C</b>	40	14
<b>X</b>	32	11
<b>V</b>	29	10
<b>D</b>	26	9
<b>Z</b>	26	9
<b>Y</b>	18	6
<b>R</b>	14	5
<b>U</b>	14	5
<b>J*</b>	11	4
<b>K*</b>	11	4
<b>L</b>	11	4
<b>E</b>	9	3
<b>F</b>	6	2
<b>W</b>	1	0
<b>T</b>	0	0

\*Staff

**Table 10- RAG 1**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>V</b>	15	22
<b>G*</b>	14	20
<b>D</b>	10	14
<b>C</b>	9	13
<b>X</b>	9	13
<b>Q*</b>	8	12
<b>F</b>	2	3
<b>A*</b>	1	1
<b>E</b>	1	1
<b>U</b>	0	0

\*Staff

**Table 11- RAG 2**

<b>Poster</b>	<b>Posts</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>H</b>	19	26
<b>O*</b>	12	16
<b>M*</b>	11	15
<b>Z</b>	10	14
<b>R</b>	8	11
<b>Y</b>	6	8
<b>E</b>	5	7
<b>A*</b>	1	1
<b>T</b>	1	1
<b>L</b>	1	1

\*Staff

**Conclusions:**

Group relations conference work, when adapted for use in the online environment, provides learning opportunities that are similar in some ways and very different in other ways from the experience of a face to face conference. Our state of understanding group and organizational dynamics in cyberspace is certainly in its infancy. Since so much work and relationship-building, in dyads, groups and social systems now is transacted in this virtual medium, our need to understand the dynamics of these interactions has never been greater.

The sponsors of this conference displayed remarkable willingness to support the conference. I hope to offer future conferences, and I would appreciate the continued support of our present sponsors as I work to engage others whose work is congruent with the mission of studying group relations. A major challenge to working on line is inherent in the Internet's existence as a world wide web. The diversity of members that we have the opportunity to work with is unprecedented in earlier group relations work. With the expense of travel and

lodging largely eliminated and the barrier of different time zones rendered irrelevant by working asynchronously, we can examine intragroup and intergroup dynamics as they develop among members from the entire international community. This extension and expansion of our understanding of group, organizational and global relations also carries the potential for quantitative analysis of these interactions, which may enhance our learning about corporate and national communication, boundary management, and delegation of authority.