

# **Selections from: GROUP RELATIONS: RATIONALE AND TECHNIQUE<sup>1</sup>**

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In June 1965, the Washington School of Psychiatry, the Yale University Department of Psychiatry, and the Centre for Applied Social Research of the Tavistock Institute of London held their first Group Relations Conference in the United States at Mount Holyoke College. With this event began the transplantation of educational methods that had developed within the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations of London to American soil.

These methods of Group Relations Training go back to a two-week residential conference organized by the Tavistock Institute and the University of Leicester in September 1957, which has been described by Trist and Sofer (1959). In the introduction to their book, *Explorations in Group Relations*, these authors speak of the contribution of social psychology, especially the work of Kurt Lewin; of the contribution of group psychotherapy, especially the work of W.R. Bion; and of the influence of Bethel, on the thinking which went into the arrangement of this conference. The primary emphasis at that time was on the study of small groups, with secondary emphasis on the application of this study to the problems that members encountered in their own work. The aim of the training offered by this conference was "to encourage in those who participate a constructively analytical and critical approach to the way they perform their roles in the groups to which they belong" (Trist and Sofer, 1959). This conference seems to have been very similar to those being run in the 1950's in the United States by the National Training Laboratories.

In the twelve years following the conference described by Trist and Sofer (1959), major changes took place in the theory and practice of the British conferences, which are now under the sponsorship of the Centre for Applied Social Research of the Tavistock Institute, so that when they were transplanted to the United States in 1965 they were no longer very similar to the comparable events of the National Training Laboratories.

## **RATIONALE**

In order to understand man in society, it is necessary to shift one's view from the individual and

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<sup>1</sup> Rioch, M. 1975 "Group Relations: Rationale and Technique" in *Group Relations Reader I* ed. A. Colman and W. Bexton Washington, D.C: A.K. Rice Institute

the pair to a larger whole. The thrust of the Washington School of Psychiatry-Tavistock Conferences is the attempt to make this shift.

Nineteenth-century science tended to break things down into smaller and smaller pieces, and great progress was made in this way, but the task now is one of integration and organization of the small pieces into intelligibly patterned wholes. This is true in biology and medicine as well as in the social sciences. One investigator, in the field of medicine, Dr. Thomas McP Brown of George Washington University, likens the task to that of a person sitting on a merry-go-round in which the horse is not only going around and up and down but also sideways, while the whole thing, mounted on a huge truck, is racing along at 100 miles per hour. In this position the investigator is supposed to describe and understand phenomena which are on a similar merry-go-around proceeding down the road alongside him (Brown, 1969). The usual approach to a situation like this is to try to limit attention to one small aspect which can be encompassed and kept in view all the time, like the one horse in front of us on our own merry-go-round. But this will not yield a solution to complex problems in medicine and biology, and still less so in the social sciences. In order to see the total pattern, attention must shift from the single horse, or, in other words, from the single individual, and we must take in a larger view. This is very easy to say, but in actual practice it is very difficult to do, especially for those who were trained in individual psychology or in looking through a microscope at the individual cell in biology. Even the social psychologist, who by definition is interested in something quantitatively larger than the individual, often finds his task so exceedingly difficult that he opts for something like a study of how individuals differ in their behavior in groups.

The two major changes which have taken place in the Tavistock-Leicester conference model in the years of A.K. Rice's directorship are both related to this shift in perspective. The first has to do with leadership and authority. On Rice's (1965) *Learning for Leadership*, he stated, "I am now working on the assumption that the primary task of the residential conferences with which my colleagues and I are concerned is to provide those who attend with opportunities to learn about leadership." His concept of leadership is a complex one which carries with it all of his very rich thinking about organizational structure and the life of institutions. More recently the conferences have been described as being about authority, and in 1969: the aim of the conference was defined in its brochure as being "to provide members with opportunities to learn about the nature of authority and the interpersonal and intergroup problems encountered in its exercise."

There is no attempt on the part of the conference staff to prescribe how members shall define or use the words authority and leadership. In considering the various meanings of these terms as they are experienced in concrete situations, members sometimes acquire greater clarity in their own thinking about these important topics. In using the word authority the conference staff indicates its concern with this significant issue in present-day society.

By focusing on problems of leadership and authority, it is possible to see the patterns of the

group emerging with regard to these concepts. The leader or leadership in a group can be thought of as representing or embodying the function of the group, especially its major function or primary task. "Primary task" is one of Rice's central concepts, and it has been defined and explained in several of his works (Rice, 1963, 1965; Miller and Rice, 1967). Briefly, he means by this term that task which an organization or institution must perform in order to survive. The organization may, and usually does, also perform secondary tasks. An important question then becomes, how do the members of the group relate to the primary task as represented by the leader? Do they accomplish the parts of it that, when put together, complete the total task? Do they fight to destroy it, betray it, sabotage it, work toward redefining or changing it? Do they compete for the position of leader? How do they conceive of authority in the group? Looking at these and other attitudes toward leaders, leadership, and authority are ways of understanding the functioning of the group as a whole.

The second major change that has taken place under Rice's directorship is a shift in emphasis away from the small group to the institution as a whole. The total conference is conceived as an interplay of the various groups of which it is constituted. Further, the institution as a whole includes the relationship with groups outside, such as the college in which the conference is located, the institutions that provide staff, members, and sponsorship; and the national and international environment that impinges upon the life of the conference. This means, of course, that the conferences deal with a much larger order of complexity than was the case in 1957. Anyone who has worked with a small group knows of the enormous number of factors operating in it and feels the need both to organize these factors into some kind of pattern and/or to exclude some of the data impinging upon his nervous system in order to make any kind of meaningful statement about the group. If one is focusing upon an institution of 50 to 70 members, its constituent parts, and its relationship to institutions outside itself, the situation is obviously even more difficult. In order to manage it at all, it is necessary, first, to have some experience and practice in taking this overall view, and, second, to have some concepts and guidelines that help to make sense out of the overwhelming mass of data. Thus, the sharp focus upon a particular aim, such as the study of the nature of authority and leadership is the other side of the coin which necessarily accompanies the wider view of the institution as a whole, including its external relation.

It is quite possible, of course, to design a conference with another primary task than that of the study of leadership and the nature of authority. It is one essential characteristic of these conferences that they attempt to state their aim clearly and to focus upon it, whatever that aim may be. The staff of each conference at the present time tries to make a clear statement about its own purpose and position and to adhere to this purpose and position no matter how difficult it may become. At the same time the staff invites and encourages questioning of its task, purpose and position, on the part of the members, and is constantly engaged in self-questioning of its own activities. A major value to which the leadership is committed is ruthless honesty in thinking

about oneself and one's group without any assumption that such honesty will necessarily lead to resolution of conflict. Thought, intellect, and rationality are highly valued, as are clear and firm decisions made in the service of a stated goal.

There is recognition on the part of the leadership of the conferences that human beings readily — all too readily — form groups, that they form mobs that lynch, groups that glorify fanatical leaders, groups that easily slip into orgiastic experiences or into the warm glow of togetherness. On the other hand, the formation of a human group seriously or consistently dedicated to a serious task, without fanaticism or illusion, is an extremely difficult process and a relatively rare occurrence. Human beings have the potentiality for this kind of group formation, however, and when it occurs, even briefly and imperfectly; it is one of the most valuable human phenomena, as well as one of the most individually satisfying experiences. Without some element of this, groups, both large and small, tend to remain childishly dependent upon a leader or a set of slogans, to seek an enemy against whom to unite, or to disintegrate in one way or another.

One of the major aims of the conferences is to contribute to people's ability to form serious work groups committed to the performance of clearly defined tasks. Whether or not members of such groups feel friendliness, warmth, closeness, competitiveness, or hostility to each other is of secondary importance. It is assumed that these and other feelings will occur from time to time, but this is not the issue. This issue is the common goal to which each individual makes his own differentiated contribution. A second major aim, closely related to the first, is the development of more responsible leadership and followership in group life.

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