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The Psycho-Dynamics of an Inter-Group Experience*

Introduction

This paper offers an analysis of processes that occur between groups collaborating on a task of direct relevance to an objective they have in common. Theoretically it is based on the work of Bion (1961) who distinguishes between two levels of group activity: that of the “sophisticated” or “work” group (*W*), which involves learning and development and addresses specific tasks that must be met and undertaken in social reality; and that of the *basic assumptions*—dependence (*baD*), fight/flight (*baF*) and pairing (*baP*)—which are unlearned, primitive emotional response systems existing as unconscious patterns that alternate with each other. The basic group organization may be in conflict with the sophisticated or *W* organization, and is often unrecognized by members of the group, whose level of performance may be severely impaired in consequence. A detailed exposition and critique of his views is given by Sutherland (Vol. 1, “Bion Revisited”) who also explains such psychoanalytic concepts as projection and introjection, extensive use of which is made in this paper.

The setting of the Inter-Group Exercise, as it was called, was a two-week Tavistock/Leicester Group Relations Training Conference (Trist and Sofer, 1959; Rice, 1965; Miller, Vol. 1, “Experiential Learning in Groups I”). The conference, held in November 1959, was the second such conference. The core experience had been the “study groups.” The Inter-Group Exercise was added to investigate inter-group behavior.

The ideal experience for this purpose would be to analyze inter-group processes in real-life situations. This is not possible in a training setting. At the other extreme were case-study/role-playing activities. The Inter-Group Exercise attempted to find an experience somewhere between these two poles. It provided a task that was real within the conference setting, but which lacked the degree of commitment or emotional involvement that a real-life situation

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would evoke. It did, however, create something that was more meaningful and powerful than is possible with a case-study procedure, or even with the more exciting "business game" type of event.

The overall task was to decide on a program of special interest sessions to take place in the second week of the conference. Members were to divide themselves into three groups which would work together in a self-chosen fashion to achieve an agreed program. The Exercise was analogous to what goes on in ordinary working groups. There was a concrete decision to be taken that would affect all the participants. They would experience the results of their decisions. The Exercise was developed by Bridger as a result of previous work with Glidewell of the National Training Laboratories at Bethel.

The conference was held at a large hotel in a small spa in the north of England. To qualify for membership an individual had to be currently in a post of responsibility. Twenty-nine members took part: four prison governors, five lecturers in education, five industrial executives; two hospital sister-tutors; six personnel or training managers in industry; seven applied social scientists from European institutions. Members had been asked on their application forms to suggest topics of particular interest to them which might be taken up during the special interest sessions. There were eight full-time staff, two from the University of Leicester and six from the Tavistock Institute.

Eight 1½-hour sessions would be devoted to the Exercise, which was to start on the afternoon of the second day. By this time the members would have experienced two study groups and one theory session. In the first session of the Exercise members would decide on a method of dividing themselves into three groups, X, Y and Z. Division into study groups was excluded, but any other type of division was allowable.

A questionnaire would evaluate the decisions reached by the groups at various points in the Exercise: the willingness of group members to carry out these decisions; and the degree of satisfaction with the way their group had arrived at them. This evaluation instrument was used five times, the results being made known to the groups.

Each group would proceed in its own way and would have attached to it a staff observer. The observers would help the groups achieve their tasks and were free to make group-centered comments. They had a recording role as a secondary function. The staff not directly concerned as observers formed a separate group. The resources of the whole staff were offered for use during the special interest sessions.

For the second and third sessions groups would devise a system of communicating with each other by means of envoys. The envoys would reach agreement on a single consolidated plan for the special interest sessions. In the fourth session, all the groups would evaluate their experience during the planning stages. The fifth, sixth and seventh sessions would be devoted to

carrying out the program decided upon. The eighth would evaluate the members' experience.

The Exercise

FORMATION OF THE GROUPS

The Exercise took place in the ballroom of the hotel, a large room 54 ft. × 47 ft. In the center of one of the long sides was a small stage and about 12 feet into the dance floor there were two large pillars about four feet square. The rest was clear.

The first session opened with the conference members seated in an irregular group in front of the stage but on the far side of the two pillars. The staff were along the front of the stage at floor level with the conference director standing in front of them facing the members. In the haphazard seating a group of seven or eight were to the side of one of the pillars. There was no-one outside the other pillar.

The Exercise was opened by the conference director running over the instructions. There were several requests for further clarification. Two new points were introduced. First, although members of the staff were willing to provide whatever help they could, the conference was reminded that there were resources among the members themselves relevant to many of the special interests listed. Secondly, that the first phase of the Exercise—to arrive at a decision about the basis for dividing into the three groups—should take no longer than 15 minutes. The conference director then said that the Exercise should start immediately and that within 15 minutes the members should have decided on what basis they would split up into groups.

What happened in the next minute or so was unexpected and crucial. After a short pause a member asked what the groups X, Y and Z were to do. The director explained this again. Immediately, somebody else asked about the role of the staff during the first part of the Exercise when the three groups were working separately. This, too, was answered. Then came a question as to whether the groups were to deal with content or were to just set a program without content. The director answered that they were asked to do what they themselves considered to be a planning job and to deal with content or not as they thought fit. In finishing, he reminded them that they now had 14 minutes left to decide on a means of forming into groups.

Immediately Z1, an industrial member, said that in industry those responsible for making such a decision would have the advice and help of staff. There was anger in his voice. While he was speaking, the small group of people who were to the outside of the pillar stood up and moved their chairs around to join