

Chapter 15

Beyond the frames

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Within the frame

Wilfred Bion, whom this book commemorates, was able to create hypotheses about the nature of human groups that took us beyond the frames. Compared with his predecessors, Freud and Trotter, Bion was able to make a quantum leap in understanding. In particular he identified the basic assumption states that members of a group can take part in, quite unconsciously, while, at the same time, they are trying to pursue some work task. I believe this to be Bion's major, awesome, contribution to our knowledge about groups.

Isabel Menzies Lyth has made the point well. In her review of Bion's contribution to thinking about groups, she notes that Bion insisted on 'the use of the group *per se*, the dynamics of the group in the here and now, as the instrument of therapy and learning' (Menzies Lyth 1981: 662). She goes on to write (p. 663):

My second point concerns his elucidation of the psychotic elements in groups. Previous reference to psychotic group behaviour had almost exclusively described gross phenomena, akin to diagnostically psychotic disorders. The subtlety of Bion's intuition was in pinpointing the less obvious but immensely powerful psychotic phenomena that appear in groups that are apparently behaving sanely, if a little strangely, groups that are working more or less effectively and whose members are clinically normal or neurotic. He describes the clusters of these psychotic phenomena as the three basic assumptions of dependency, fight-flight and pairing. They have in common massive splitting and projective identification, loss of individual distinctiveness or depersonalisation, diminution of effective contact with reality, lack of belief in progress and development through work and suffering.

This is the second leitmotiv of this essay: how to explore psychotic phenomena in groups incuding any personal and social defences against such an exploration because of the anxieties invoked.

The focus of this essay is on groups as an instrument of learning. At one level the essay is about learning within the frames of groups as such, but it is also a record of going beyond these frames to fathom larger issues of institutions and societies. It is also a record of my puzzlement about the unconscious world.

One of the outstanding outcomes of Bion's thinking about groups has been the growth of group relations training conferences. What commonly is known as the Tavistock method, or model, arises from Bion's

my way is in the sand flowing
between the shingle and the dune
the summer rain rains on my life
on me my life harrying fleeing
to its beginning to its end

my peace is there in the receding mist
when I may cease from treading these long, shifting thresholds
and live the space of a door
that opens and shuts (Samuel Beckett 1961)

The idea of frame

There exists a striking fourteenth-century Syrian miniature of the Archangel Gabriel. What disturbs the Western eye, at first, is that the bell of the horn which Gabriel blows bursts through the exquisitely limned frame that the artist has placed around the figure of Gabriel and the text below. Although the figure is flat, and there is no sense of perspective, the visual effect of the horn bursting through the frame is that the picture has a third dimension; the picture jumps out of its frame. It is only on reflection that the observer realizes that Gabriel's horn cannot be contained within a mere frame, for he is the bringer of good news, having been visited by a vision (Daniel 8: 16-26).

In the context of this essay, that is perhaps not quite so important as the simple idea that frames have both an inside and outside; they contain the space inside and leave undefined the space outside. Furthermore, frames are artifacts which can be delineated at will. This is one leitmotiv of this essay.

have resulted in an Establishment(s), i.e., the group relations training institutions to which I already have referred. I am in doubt as to whether 'Establishment' is singular or plural. My postulate is that there is an Establishment 'in the mind'. Each institution (such as the Tavistock Institute, the A. K. Rice Institute, and the others) at times actually becomes the Establishment for the others. The Establishment 'in the mind' is the ideal-typical institution purveying the very best of Bion's thinking and those who were immediately associated with him and who began the various institutions for group relations training. Here, I suggest, a number of individuals have been put into the role of representing the untarnished truth of Bion, Rice *et al.* Each conference sponsored by any one of these Establishments can be seen as the 'group' in Bion's terms. The mystic who could be either a member of the conference or the conference staff will have his or her disruptive ideas dealt with by the group, the members of whom must preserve coherence even at the risk of new understanding. I can write more pertinently from my own experience. A few years ago I used the word 'relatedness' in a conference staff group. Even though Turquet had introduced the concept earlier, I found myself regarded with puzzlement by my then colleagues. Now, 'relatedness', as a term, is part of the language of any conference. At best, the Establishment(s) come, in time, to have a symbiotic relationship with the mystic. But the possibilities of commensal and parasitic relationships are always present.

The other aspect I want to pursue is the postulate that institutions for group relations training come, at times, individually to act as an Establishment for the others. Thus, at best, another institution can take on the role of mystic in the sense that the term is being used in this context.

This, however, is both complicated and enriched by issues of institutional transference and countertransference. Clearly, institutions themselves are not capable of transference but their agents or employees are. Lomas, in his discussion of psychiatric clinics, makes the point that there is transference on the part of agents of clinical institutions towards their clients. He identifies

a type of institutional countertransference, a transference of attitudes and feelings on the part of employees to the imagos that haunt the halls of the clinic itself. These attitudes and feelings, be they latent or manifest, inevitably cause such employees to become agents of the institution, executing the expressed mission of the organization, often without any regard for the clientele; and, worse, these attitudes

pioneering work. Since 1957 when the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, then in conjunction with the University of Leicester, sponsored the first experiential working conference for studying the behaviour of groups, there has been an unbroken tradition till now. Under the leadership of A. K. Rice there was a shift in the direction of these conferences towards learning about leadership (Rice 1965). Later the emphasis moved towards the study of authority and the problems encountered in its exercise within organizations and institutions (Lawrence 1979a: 2). Since then, I think, there has been a push through to the experiential exploration of the politics of relatedness, the theme of destructive differences (gender, age, race, etc.) and the study of social innovation. This last change of focus has been attempted by the current two joint directors of the Group Relations Training Programme of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, Eric J. Miller and myself.

Parallel to the Tavistock conferences, other institutions have been founded to pursue the same kind of work. In the USA there is the A. K. Rice Institute and an apparent proliferation of others. In the UK there is the Grubb Institute of Behavioural Studies and the Chelmsford Cathedral Centre for Research and Training. There is also an institution in Sweden (AGSLO) for the study of leadership and organization. There have been other institutions which have risen and died, and others may now exist of which I do not know. My purpose, however, is not to set out a detailed history but to try and identify a social process which I am postulating influences the elaboration, through these institutions, of Bion's original insights about groups.

Through the growth of enterprises to provide group relations training there has been the phenomenon of institutionalization. From my role perspective, as joint director of a Tavistock Institute programme of work, I find myself, at times, in the thick of this experience of institutionalization. Bion, himself, has identified this phenomenon (1970: 82):

The institutionalizing of words, religions, psycho-analysis — all are special instances of institutionalizing memory so that it may 'contain' the mystic revelation and its creative and destructive force. The function of the group is to produce a genius; the function of the Establishment is to take up and absorb the consequences so that the group is not destroyed.

There can be little doubt that Bion had the qualities of a mystic (cf. Grofstein 1981: 33) if only because of his contribution to our thinking about groups. The paradox is that the disruptive ideas he first presented

and feelings cause such employees to carry out procedures that are in direct conflict with their own personal feelings (1979: 548).

While a group relations training institution cannot be readily likened to a clinic, with its buildings and permanent personnel, it would be worth while systematically considering the types of transference which occur between conference staffs and members, conference staffs and their Establishment(s) and the imagos of the Establishment 'in the mind'. To avoid the disentangling of this and the testing of the reality or not of particular conference staffs being caught in the impersonalized procedures identified by Lomas, other institutions grow up with the latent task of providing a less painful experience than a Leicester Conference, as has been reported to me more than once.

All I can offer, at this point, is my experience that there are transference and countertransference feelings between agents of Establishment. So, if you will, the relationships and relatednesses of mystic, group and Establishment and the dynamics of commensality, symbiosis and parasitism come to be worked out at both interpersonal and institutional levels.

To put my concern in concrete terms: the felt pressure on the programme of the Tavistock is never to be innovative; it must be saddled with stability, certainty and perseverance. But it must never disappear, as this would leave other comparable institutions with problems of rivalry for succession that would have to be fought out. So the idea of the Tavistock programme as a dead, hollow container or spittoon easily comes to mind, even though individuals as agents may feel differently within themselves. Essentially I am also saying that the memory of group relations training conferences is so powerful because of institutionalization that new transformations which might lead to a deeper ignorance and then a more profound understanding of groups are constricted. As Establishments have grown to perpetuate the work of Bion, the world of groups with their psychotic phenomena is in danger of being defined for ever. The possibility of suggestion that might lead to tentative new insights can be squeezed out. Remember:

To define is to kill

To suggest is to create. (Stéphane Mallarmé)

The puzzle is how to generate symbiotic relationships between new ideas and the Establishment(s) and avoid the commensal and parasitic ones, to use Bion's formulation. This is another leitmotiv.

Once in Ireland a motorist stopped his car to ask a pedestrian the way to Ballykinler. His informant said he could certainly tell him the way, but added, 'I wouldn't be starting from here!' I feel much the same about group relations working in conferences at times. I have a sense that with the institutionalization of Establishments a technology has developed. I purposely use the term 'technology' to give the sense that, in the process of institutionalization, the perseverators of the Tavistock method/model become technicians as opposed to being *makers*, which is the old Scottish word for poets.

As, then, with any inheritance, there are puzzlements around what ought to be discarded in order to break through to some new understanding in the context of the times in which we live. What I am quite sure about, from my role perspective, is that to take psychoanalytic and Bion's thinking about groups out of this tradition would be to end it. And there can be a sense of an ending as I experience it occasionally when working with some staffs of group relations training conferences who are preoccupied with pre-conscious material and not struggling to elucidate unconscious phenomena, or, alternatively, when I find myself in a consultant staff which is in a pre-emptive frame of mind, that is interpreting staff and member experiences in such a way that further exploration is truncated. It is in such contexts that mutative¹ interpretations, which are those which engage with puzzling and lead to change, are destroyed.

What I am less sure about, and continually want to question, is the continued acceptance of the 'frames' and 'orders' which have been established and institutionalized to capture and explore the kind of group phenomena that Bion first illuminated.

By 'frames' I mean the 'small study group', the 'large study group', the 'institutional event', and all the other events. In order to explore the phenomenal stuff of the existence of people in groups, we, in our roles of conference designers, draw outlines or contours around selected numbers and frame them. The figure twelve is traditionally a small group; six, a very small group; twenty-five plus, a large group, or is it a median group? To be sure, there can be no identifiable group without such a contour or frame. But, at the very same time, it is known that such frames, outlines or contours impose limits which have to be accepted by the people involved. Those limits become boundaries enabling the differentiation of what is inside the frame from what is outside. Nevertheless, they constrain the exploration of experiences and phenomena that cannot yet be imagined. The paradox is inevitable.

Another paradox arises when the 'orders' associated with these

external authority and power structures is easy to see. On the face of it, it looks as if internal and external management structures are matched. In fantasy and because of transference feelings the membership of a conference will tend to see them as exactly the same, even though the management of a conference may be directing its efforts to providing conditions for the membership to manage themselves in relation to their learning. Here I want to emphasize that I see conferences as being an opportunity for members and staff to re-affirm their capacities to inspect and question the social contexts in which they are existing. The hope is always that members will internalize from staff modes of inspecting the unconscious aspects of social arrangements and go on to forge their own perspective for questioning the social meaning of frames and orders.

A central heuristic tool for such questioning is provided through the concept of primary task. Every working conference on group relations is bounded in time, space and activity. The boundaries (frames) of time and space are obvious. What is less obvious, on first inspection, is the boundary between work that is directed at understanding and non-work which is to avoid insight. Here, there is a seeming paradox. The experience of Bion's basic assumption states (crudely, and by some oversimplistically defined as non-work) within the boundaries of a conference and its activities come to be the work of a conference. Work directed at coming close to what may be the truth of a situation can only be attained through the experience of the basic assumption states; the psychotic phenomena.

The ideal work of a conference is differentiated from other subjective experiences through the use of the concept of primary task. It is a heuristic device and not a prescriptive one, though it can be reduced to that by some practitioners. It is based on

the proposition that every enterprise or part of it, has, at any given moment, one task which is primary. What we (E. J. Miller and

A. K. Rice) also say, however, is that, if, through inadequate appraisal of internal resources and external forces, the leaders of an enterprise define the primary task in an inappropriate way, or the members — leaders and followers alike — do not agree on their definition, then the survival of the enterprise will be jeopardised. Moreover, if the organization is regarded primarily as an instrument for task performance, we can add that, without adequate task definition, disorganization must occur (Miller and Rice 1967: 27-8).

frames and their selection are considered. I use the term 'order' in the same way as Weber. Some years after he had developed the concept of bureaucracy which described the kinds of organization that man had evolved to execute tasks, he said in a debate:

This passion for bureaucracy . . . is enough to drive one to despair.

It is as if in politics . . . we were deliberately to become men who need 'order' and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helplessness if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is such an evolution that we are already caught up in, and the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parcelling-out of the soul . . . (quoted in Bennis 1971: 144).

The theme of 'order' has always been present in the work of the Tavistock conferences with their emphasis on responsibility, leadership, authority, organization and, now, the politics of relatedness. While the fantasy will persist that Tavistock conferences are 'authoritarian', the commitment of staffs of such conferences is to exploring these dimensions of 'order' in order to ensure that they are scrutinized and questioned. One way in which this is done is by holding to the psycho-analytic tradition of trying to make as explicit as possible transference and countertransference feelings between the managerial and consultant staffs of a conference and the membership. The staff, in fantasy, at times will be seen as a privileged sub-group of the conference, at once destructive, persecuting, protective, benign. The collection of these transference feelings and the working through of them is one way that a staff can help the membership find its authority to take responsibility for making the conference a learning institution.

To be sure, there will be ambivalent feelings about authority. There will often occur as a social process a 'rage for order' on the part of some members and staff that is reminiscent of Weber's insight, but there will also be a wish for absolute autonomy and freedom; even a hunger for disorder.

It is around this theme of order that the subjectivity of the individual is most closely engaged because order, while it may appear to be rational and logical, is often supported by unspoken and unconscious wishes for protection against the anxiety of finding authority to take initiative to feel and see beyond the orders.

The connection between the inner world of conferences and the

In order to elucidate what is taking place both consciously and unconsciously among the people who make up the organization of an enterprise — and here groups of various sizes are to be included — the heuristic concept of primary task has been further elaborated. On inspection, it is possible to differentiate between the normative primary task, the existential primary task and the phenomenal primary task. The first is the task which the people in an enterprise consciously and rationally know has to be performed if the enterprise is to survive as an institution. The existential primary task is the one which people believe they are executing. On occasion there will be agreement between the normative and existential task but not at other times. The existential primary task is the individual's perception of the purpose of his or her activity. If the individual has internalized the normative primary task the chances are that he or she will be able to take up a role in the system of activity. If the individual is concerned more with self-survival than institutional survival, the existential primary task will be salient. These two definitions of the situation of an individual in role in a system of activity are conscious in the sense that they can be established through a question and answer process, for instance. What is less obvious is the phenomenal primary task. This is the unconscious task which is being pursued. It can be hypothesized that within any system of activity there will be this task sitting alongside the other two. At times all these will coincide to produce high calibre work but there may be tensions between the three. If the phenomenal primary task is salient in a system of activity, it is a mental world of the psychotic, i.e., the basic assumption states of Bion. Although I am not certain about this, I would suggest that the existential primary task enables the neurotic quality of life in systems of activity to be identified. Certainly, the phenomenal primary task is the one of which people are not consciously aware (cf. Lawrence 1977: 24). By holding these three versions of primary task in mind it is possible to generate hypotheses as to the conscious and unconscious behaviour of people within the boundary, or frame, of a group or a larger enterprise with its fantasied and reality orders.

Working conferences have a primary task, but a conference designer only can state a primary task on behalf of the staff who constitute the collective management of the conference. For example, the primary task for the September 1978 working conference, entitled 'Individual and Organization: The Politics of Relatedness', was stated as follows: 'To study and interpret experiences of political relatedness within the conference Institution'. Such a primary task definition differentiates the working conference as a temporary learning enterprise or institution

from its environment. It also enables the people taking part in the conference — both staff (as collective management and consultants) and the members — to join the conference by taking and making roles in it in contradistinction to attending it. Without a primary task there can be no conference.

Working conferences are based on the postulate that they are open systems interacting with their environment (cf. Rice 1958: 40 of 1970 edn; Rice 1965: 2-27). Essentially a working conference provides opportunities for members and staff to transform themselves from a state of not knowing so much about groups into a state of further understanding groups at first hand through experience, as opposed to learning about groups from written sources, for example.

Within a conference boundary — itself a frame — there are such events as: the small study group, the large study group, the inter-group event, the institutional event, review groups, application groups, and conference plenaries. These have all been framed by conference designers in order to pursue the aim of experientially understanding group phenomena. Each of these events has a primary task which enables both members and staff to differentiate appropriate work from non-work. From the conference staff group — members of which have the two sub-roles of collective management and consultants — consultants are delegated authority to work with a section of the membership, say, in a small study group. It is unlikely that in the opening stages of a conference the members will have the political machinery to execute a similar kind of delegation but in the course of a conference a shared sense of delegation by members of members is likely to increase, particularly within the inter-group and the institutional events. Indeed, the staff both in their managerial and consultant roles are working to enable the membership to find their authority.

To these have to be added other events which do not appear on the programme of the conference. There is 'the-event-of-the-staff-as-a-group' and, similarly, 'the-event-of-the-membership-as-a-group-and-in-groups-of-their-own-choice'. I shall simply call these the staff group event and the membership group(s) event(s). About these very little is known because they are rarely open to direct study as they are regarded as being private. Nevertheless they are important because they influence other events in the conference.

To be sure, in the institutional event and in some versions of the inter-group event the staff are present as a group and their behaviour is open to observation and interpretation as they make their roles both as management and consultants. In these events they are present as a staff

group with work to do, but I am interested in the influence of the private events of the staff as a group and the membership as a group as they relate outside the stated, defined, framed events as sentient groups.

Miller and Rice introduced the concept of 'sentient group'. They wrote:

We have chosen *sentient* — 'that feels or is capable of feeling; having the power or function of sensation or of perception by the senses, 1632 (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) — as expressing most clearly what we mean without using the specialised vocabulary of psycho-analysis. We shall therefore talk of *sentient system* and *sentient group* to refer to that system or group that demands and receives loyalty from its members; and we shall talk of *sentient boundary* to refer to the boundary round a sentient group or sentient system. We shall also use *sentience* to mean 'the condition or quality of being sentient' (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*) (1967: xiii, italics in original).

Clearly, members can develop sentience only during the course of a conference though it is quite clear that those who are acquainted beforehand might arrive at a conference with that potentiality. The chances are that a staff group will have more sentient qualities at the start of a conference than the members. Within a staff group there may be a tension between sentient sub-groupings and the staff as a work group. In my experience this most commonly takes the form of a pair which I assume, at worst, is a formation that is used by the pair and by the remainder of the staff, whose relations come to be influenced by the pair, as a defensive system against the anxieties of engaging with the psychotic qualities of the framed events. At the same time the pair comes to be used in exactly the same way as Bion identified when he described the basic assumption pairing culture, i.e., a hope for creativity, but doomed to failure.

Sentient groups and groupings will develop and change within the period of a conference both for staff and members. From these groups and groupings individuals can be seen as taking up roles in the framed events and through their work experiences within them making sentient groups and groupings.

There is, then, within a conference and its framed events a substantial richness for learning, not all of which has yet been identified. If we accept the inescapable paradox that to draw a contour, frame or boundary precludes experiencing what is outside the frame, we can

have an opportunity, if we give ourselves authority, to explore even more deeply within the frames of conference events. If the basic assumption states which Bion first identified are understood to be, in Conrad's words, 'the heart of darkness' (Broadbent 1979: 193 ff.) there are opportunities within a working conference on group relations to be in touch vividly and vitally with unconscious processes.

One framed event, for example, that ever continues to stir me, whether as a member or a taker of it, is the large group. This event grew out of the experiences which the members of staff in the 1960s were having in conference plenaries. These occur at the beginning and towards the end of a working conference and are designed to offer a frame within which both members and staff can reflect on their experiences of joining, participating in and leaving the conference.

Pierre Turquet, in his paper 'Threats to identity in the large group', points out that it was the inexplicability of social forces which occurred in conference plenaries that brought about the specific study of large groups in their own right. A new frame was created.

From his experiences as a consultant to the large group, Turquet developed a rare phenomenological description of what takes place for the participating individual. His working hypothesis was that the individual member comes to a working conference, and therefore the large group, as a 'singleton'. Turquet introduced this term

for this person entering into a new conference totally on his or her own, not yet part of a group but attempting both to find himself and to make relations with the other singletons who are in a similar state. As yet within the large group situation no relationships with other singletons have been established; nor do previous acquaintanceships seem to operate.

One of the characteristics of a large group is that many of its members remain in the singleton state, unable, possibly unwilling, to join in and so go through the necessary change of state. This conversion process is part of the dislocation every conference member experiences as he takes himself into a world which transcends the usual parameters of his own individuality (1975: 94).

Turquet develops his ideas about the conversion process available to the members of the large group. He or she can become an individual member (I.M.), i.e., convert from the singleton state as he or she struggles to make relationships with other singletons. Once the large group assumes some meaning for the individual and he or she tries to make a

construct of it in the mind the chances of converting to the 'membership individual' (M.I.) are enhanced. To be sure, this conversion process is not without its risks because the construct may only express the destructive feelings of the singleton and his fears of being annihilated by the large group and its members. So singletons can use the large group as a repository for negative feelings in order to maintain their own sense of a positive, individual boundary. There are, of course, other possibilities.

The struggle between the I.M. or M.I., or I.M. back to singleton states is experienced as flux. It is in these transitional states that the importance of the personal boundary, or external skin, is paramount. The dilemma can be stated as: 'This is me; that is not me.' With subtlety, Turquet goes on to describe the necessity for what he calls the 'second skin', the internal skin which

is needed so that the singleton can separate himself out from his background, more specifically from the undifferentiated non-singleton matrix out of which he has developed and to which he might return again, if the I.M. status is not securely established, the various problematic processes having failed him and the defensive manoeuvres having broken down (1975: 97).

This internal skin includes a history of past and present. Thus the 'here and now' can be separated from the past by the individual that, for him or her, becomes 'a background called the "past"' (p. 97). Turquet goes on to say that this background boundary skin has another aspect: 'While the presence of the past gives rise to a sense of continuity of growth out of all our yesterdays, the singleton's immediate experience is nevertheless one of discontinuity, of being different, of being other than he was yesterday' (1975: 97).

This sense of discontinuity and dislocation is very frightening but brings the singleton up against larger existential issues than just his or her private troubles. As Turquet says:

Anxiety surges up with a developing content of annihilation, becoming fear of a void in which to be lost. Since internally nothing can be found, there is nothing there. The move to try and re-establish a 'here and now' contact with the skin-of-my-neighbor can then be very quick. Macneice puts these aspects of the singleton's dilemma very aptly: 'An historical sense is essential, which means that we must know how to be new as contrasted with repetition — psittacosis — on

the one hand, and with escape from tradition — aphasia — on the other.' He adds both graphically and dramatically: 'We must sit in the seats of our ancestors, i.e., we must turn our ancestors out of them.' As far as man in a group is concerned, whether it be large or small, that is easier said than done (1975: 98-9).

From Turquet's unrivalled exploration of the phenomenological experiences of large groups I want to draw out three points.

First, in a footnote, Turquet, using the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, defines a 'matrix' as 'a place or medium in which something is bred, produced or developed and hence in the sense of a place of origin or growth' (1975: 96). As I understand it, at present, there is a distinction to be made between a matrix and a framed event such as a large group. If you will, matrix holds the potential creativity of a large group and indeed the matrix qualities have yet to be explored experientially or, rather, the tension between the matrix in the mind and the group in the mind.

Second, Turquet has set out some of the dimensions of dislocation available for members of a large group. The theme of dislocation is one that I want to hold on to. Later in the same paper Turquet introduces the neologism 'disarray' which is 'a state of complete bewilderment'. He writes (1975: 103):

'disarray' becomes the overwhelming experience, including a picture that the world can never be the same again. The word 'disarray' is used here not only to describe the actual experience of change, with an inherent notion of disintegration and collapse, but also to indicate the presence of a wish to return to *status quo ante*, with further wishes not to know, never to return and would that he had never been there.

The experience of disarray (which I take to be derived from the French word '*désarray*') is thus essential for learning in that it is a fulcrum experience from which the individual can tilt himself or herself in various directions for knowing and not knowing.

Third, I think that the large group is a framed event that gives us a glimpse of society as refracted through members and consultant staff at a particular point in time. There are larger public issues than the private struggles of the individuals as they engage with the experience of disarray. To be sure, a large group can mobilize the topic of 'society' as a defence against the problems of disarray but, at other times, there can

be a real sense of seeing how people are reacting to the larger group in the mind, i.e., society. At present, large groups seem to be characterized by members, or more accurately singletons, having no potentiality for experiencing any faith or belief in the dependability of any grouping that is larger than a face to face one. Hence, large groups become repositories for all that is negative and destructive in order that the individual as singleton can preserve himself or herself in a pre-experience, pristine, narcissistic state. Disarray is to be avoided. This I can see mirrored in institutions outside conferences, particularly as the environment becomes more uncertain and menacing.

Alongside these points, I want to set a personal experience which occurred in a large group and which caused me to think further in terms of the leitmotifs of this essay. Once, as a large-study-group-taker, I felt that beyond the section of the membership I was looking at I could see a 'black hole'. For me, the darkness of bewilderment and chaos seemed unfathomable; the terror was making me feel nauseous. I had visions of the whole membership and the consultants being sucked into that hole never to reappear. In that moment two lines of a poem were born that became:

Mind holes in blind space are ours of choice,
questing neoteric echoes of our voice (Lawrence 1979b).

The pun on 'mined' and 'mind' is obvious but 'neoteric' was used to give the sense of a 'fresh' voice. Why 'echoes'? I was aware at that time that any voice echoes a past of other voices (cf. Turquet 1975: 98-9, already quoted).

What was important, at the time, for me was the coming up against the inaccessibility of experience *per se*. Words came to my mind to fit the experience but, finally, took over and made an experience. The astronomical metaphor became what I believed was the reality of the time. Patterns of thought, perception and 'understanding' — 'memory' in Bion's terms — intervened to frame the senses. And then it is an easy matter to associate mentally at a preconscious level. The experience comes to be named as 'blind space', 'nothingness', of being in the 'abyss', of seeing the 'void'. But in naming what is believed to be the experience, the possibility of knowing what the experience might be in itself is lost. To be sure, I could have expressed much of this in terms of Bion's transformations into O. What I want to hold on to, at this juncture, is the overpowering wish for the ordering of experience, in terms of a metaphor, for example, within the frame of an event. I go so far as to

say that there is a rage for order to defend against a sense of annihilation and a fear of disappearing into a black hole; psychosis.

At the same time as I was becoming caught up in the astronomical metaphor I started to have more elaborate fantasies as to what would happen (a) if the large group *en masse* went into the black hole or (b) if the participants in this large group were able to rise from their seats and spill all over the room as a crowd, even a mob; disordered and destructive.

Let me stay with the idea of 'order'. There is increasingly in conferences within framed events a rage for order in terms of memory. Bion once wrote somewhere about the hatred of learning from experience. Just because a working conference exists for the purpose of providing opportunities to study, at first hand, experiences in groups, does not mean to say that the participants (both staff and members) will not be free from the hatred of learning. The hatred I see most clearly as being around discovering or tumbling into the psychotic experiences that Bion first identified.

Pressing this further: in my most disillusioned state I begin to have the suspicion that working conferences can be interpreted as well-rehearsed dramas with the title 'Oedipus Vivat!' How far, at times, are both the staff and members orchestrating the fugue of work group versus basic assumption groups, albeit with variations?

To re-state what, in part, I have already said: have the frames (conferences and their events) with all their potentiality for dislocation, disorder and disarray that could lead to new learning come to be so potent that they have to be defended against mobilizing, for example, the rage for order? To be sure, the interpretation of resistance is a major pivot that can tip both the members and the staff into new learning.

But, at the same time, I want to hold on to much that is rich and positive in working conferences and try to build on what my predecessors in this kind of venture have discovered and illuminated, even though the capacity to speak with the dead is easily eroded. What is enormously exciting about working conferences and their framed event, such as I am puzzling around, is that, at their very best, they provide what Winnicott called a 'cultural space'. His ideas or formulations on the location of culture experiences make sense in relation to working conferences. His quotation from Rabindranath Tagore is apt: 'On the seashore of endless worlds — children play.' In puzzling around frames and orders I see myself as exploring the seashores of endless worlds and wishing to play with the wonderment of a child, discovering for the first time.

Winnicott's main thesis is so succinctly stated that it deserves to be quoted rather than paraphrased. I quote the first three points:

1. The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play.

2. For every individual the use of this space is determined by *life experience* that takes place at the early stages of the individual's existence.

3. From the beginning the baby has maximally intense experiences in the *potential space between subjective object and the object objectively perceived*, between the me-extension and the not-me. This potential space is at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control (1971: 100, italics in original).

I postulate that group relations working conferences offer individuals a unique potential space in which to be playful and creative between themselves and the environment of the conference. In turn, this experience can be transferred to other interfaces with environments. Working conferences can, of course, only provide a potential space which is analogous to Winnicott's cultural space. But given that members have the opportunity, if they take the authority, to regress in the service of the ego — to experience, as adults, disarray — within framed and contained time, space and task boundaries of a conference and its events, the possibility of a novel cultural space being evoked and experienced is enhanced.

In the same paper, 'The location of cultural experience', Winnicott goes on to describe the *third area* which is the one between 'the inner or personal psychic reality and with the actual world in which the individual lives' (1971: 102-3). Within the framed events of a conference the possibility of rediscovering and remarking experiences in the third area is always possible (cf. Turquet's discussion reported above).

The search for the third area has preoccupied me for a number of years in the course of my professional practice as a consultant at the Tavistock Institute. By this I mean that I am trying to make opportunities for my client and myself to clear a third area for play and cultural experience. In relation to the subject of this essay I am aware how easy it is to have that area made into a desert full of memories and desires, rage for order, and a hatred of learning. How I have tried to struggle with a tradition, but avoiding psittacosis and aphasia, in order to develop some something fresh I shall now try and outline.

Outwith the frame

The leap beyond the existing framed events of working conferences to the interstices or gaps between them is what I now want to explicate. And here I am in difficulties in the role of a writer: on the one hand, I am under an obligation to communicate directly but, on the other hand, I know that the thought processes which led me to explore beyond the frames into a fresh area for me were not strictly logical. My dilemma is well stated by McLuhan and Nevitt:

Beyond Exposition for Exploration

Civilized, rationally educated people expect and prefer to have problems described and analyzed sequentially. They try to *follow* your argument to a conclusion. They expect the conclusion to be your *point of view*, illustrative of your *values*. In contrast to the method of exposition is the method of exploration. This begins by the admission of ignorance and difficulties. Such statements will tend to be a tentative groping. The blind man's cane picks up the *relation* of things in his environment by the quality of resonance. His tapping tells him what objects are adjacent to his stick. If his stick were *connected* to any of these objects, he would be helpless so far as orientation was concerned. This is always the plight of the logical method. It is useless for exploration. Its very strength makes it irrelevant. 'Proof' of sanity is available only to those discharged from mental institutions (1972: 8, italics in original).

I hold to the idea of exploration of the interstices between the framed events about which I have been puzzling. What resonates in the spaces between them? So I cull a number of ideas from the text so far:

frame, contour, space;
order;

psychotic, heart of darkness;

'We penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness.

It was very quiet there . . .' (Joseph Conrad);

memory, desire, the institutionalization of words;

'I wouldn't be starting from here';

makar;

fugue;

singleton, I., I.M., M.I., I. (Pierre Turquet);

dislocation, disarray;
 matrix = a place or medium in which something is born;
 'and live the space of a door that opens and shuts' (Samuel Beckett);
 the third area (Donald Winnicott).

To these I add other associations:

making it new
 in a land heavy with stones
 and each stone has a history (Robin Fulton);
 interstice, gap, hiatus, lacuna;
 ectopia, from the Greek *ἐκτοπος* = out of place and, in
 New Testament Greek, *τοπος* = desert but can also mean
 a person's final resting place where destiny brings him;
 counterpoint, contrapuntal.

And bear in mind:

in any cultural field *it is not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition*. Conversely, no one in the line of cultural contributors repeats except as a deliberate quotation, and the unforgivable sin in the cultural field is plagiarism. The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union (1971: 99, italics in original).

But also think about:

The visionary artist is the artist of the irrational, the obscure, the monstrous: his values lie not in order and discipline, but in inspiration, whether sublime or perverse. His subject matter is not the everyday world, but the ancient and dangerous archetypes which lie hidden in the deepest regions of the unconscious. If the danger to the psychological artist² is barrenness, sterility, a vitality — destroying discipline, the danger to the visionary artist is incoherence, or even madness. To reside absolutely at one or the other pole means at the very least artistic death: either sanity bought at the price of sterility, or immediate experience of the unconscious at the price of psychosis (Day 1973: 468).

And:

The spaces between the stones is where the survivors live (Robin Fulton).

At Santinikiten, north of Calcutta in India, is the ashram of Rabindranath Tagore. There can be seen a sufficient number of his pictures to understand his development as an artist. His pictures are of an abstract nature. They arose directly out of his writing. As he corrected his poems by heavily scoring out words, lines and whole passages, he found that the deletions made patterns. These he elaborated subsequently into paintings. What was ground became figure. In much the same way the event I am about to describe arose out of the ground that was figure of working conferences.

Because of the kind of puzzles which I have indicated in the first part of this essay I had been brooding about an event which would be contrapuntal to other recognized events in a working conference. What I was quite sure about was that the event had to be grounded in the tradition of group relations training associated with the Tavistock Institute. At one and the same time the event had to be within the task, time and territorial boundaries of a conference and be ectopic. It had to be an event that provided opportunities for both members and staff to take authority to be out of their framed, ordered places in the conference life so that they could look at the regular, framed events with fresh wonderment.

My anxieties were (and still continue to be) many: would I be betraying the tradition from which I have derived so much? Would I be in danger of creating an event with insufficient boundaries which would result in the anxieties of both staff and members becoming so high that nothing could be learned? Was I in danger of creating an event which would have untold effects on the working-through of transference and countertransference feelings which are critical for the discovery by members of their authority to interpret? Indeed, would the event be an elaborate system to defend against the staff's anxieties about transference feelings? How far was I caught up in destructive feelings about conferences because of my growing disillusionment about the technicians?

The new event — the Praxis Event — was introduced at a working conference at Gif-sur-Yvette in France in 1978. The title of the conference was 'Exercising Authority for Social Innovation', which was sponsored by the Group Relations Training Programme of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and La Fondation Internationale de l'Innovation Sociale, Paris.³ The conference programme included conference plenaries, a large study group, an institutional event, and the

equivalent of review and application groups which were called innovation study groups. The primary task of the conference was:

to provide participants with opportunities to learn about and interpret their experiences of managing personal and social innovation within the organizational boundaries of the conference.

The French conference, because of its primary task, could allow for a new venture in group relations training. In particular, I wanted an event that would allow different opportunities for managing personal and social innovation than were available within the framed events. There had to be an opportunity for action and practice, i.e., praxis.

With the authority of the staff as collective management I, in the role of director, negotiated a primary task for the praxis event in a plenary session. The negotiation of a primary task was seen as being an essential element of the event because it would not be given as in other events but be worked through in plenary sessions. The criterion which was made explicit was that the primary task of the praxis event had to be congruent with the primary task of the conference. What was set were the time and territorial boundaries of the event.

In the opening plenary of the event the point was made that once a primary task had been negotiated and to which participants could give their authority, the director would give up his role for the period of the event as would staff cease to be management and consultants. During the period the administrators would hold the conference management role. This is no different, in fact, from times in any conference when all the staff are employed in consultant roles to events. Here the punctilious establishment of boundaries was to create the optimum conditions for containment and dependability in order that members and staff could be free to manage their explorations within the praxis event. Roles within the praxis event arose out of the primary task of the event.

I see little point in describing what took place during that first praxis event. I want to avoid premature institutionalization! My experience has been that each one is different. Now that it has been incorporated into other working conferences, I find, in terms of conference design, that it is better to have the praxis event before the institutional event because what is learned from the former gives a new political dimension to the latter.

Rather I want to give three associations. First, a participant⁴ in one praxis event subsequently wrote to me enclosing a quotation from *The Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*:

The philosophy of praxis is consciousness full of contradictions, in which the philosopher himself, understood both individually and as an entire social group, not merely grasps the contradictions, but posits himself as an element of the contradiction and elevates this element to a principle of knowledge and therefore of action.

What I take out of this is the notion that an individual is a social group in the sense that we each carry in our inner worlds a cluster of imagos of all our previous relationships and also a version of society in the mind. In addition, each person has the potentiality and possibly the experience of a range of roles. Some of these may be contradictory, e.g., a manager who is concerned about productivity, production and profit is also a citizen who may have different views about the effect of some work practices on individuals. Such an individual may also be the parent of a young school-leaver who may not be able to get employment, and so on. The contradictions are apparent but are often not available for scrutiny in everyday life. This is because rarely can a way be found for doing so. So a praxis event can provide a space where societal puzzles can be engaged with.

Second, it was within a praxis event that I discovered afresh what I shall call the Moment. I am aware that others have used this term and given it their meaning. For me, it is the discovery of an internal space where one has never explored — it may be between the first and second skins which Turquet described, but I am not sure. The experience is of being in internal disarray and then being able to put together feelings in a new way, for example something of one's personal history and the present. It is a moment of internal making and is purely of feeling. It is the nearest I have come to what I understand to be an epiphany, i.e., any moment of great or sudden revelation. My guess is that the praxis event provides a different kind of framed space and time for personal and social exploration than other events. This is because it has a short history to date, is ectopic in the sense that roles are different from other events in a conference, provides a third area and allows opportunities to experience a matrix rather than a group as such. Perhaps, the strength of the praxis event rests in its contrapuntal quality, i.e., being in the interstice of other events. Such conditions are conducive for self and social revelation.

Third, for a long time I have been disillusioned with the technical preoccupations of participants in conferences. At worst, this is a schizoid type of leadership which is very competent about the Tavistock method, group dynamics etc. Such leadership takes a long time to fathom because

those in that role are very adept and skilled in interpretations. If this kind of leader is in the membership he or she will be supported by others even though they become victims of the desperate processes which are engendered. Group psychosis is manipulated on such occasions. Such leadership is difficult to interpret because the leaders use interpretation in the service of the defence of their own egos. Hence, I am concerned to find complementary ways of understanding group phenomena to break some of the rituals I pointed to earlier in this essay to get through to disarray.

It is therefore through experiences in working conferences of the Tavistock, particularly the large study group and the praxis event, that I have been led to explore a different language to express what I feel groups are about. The praxis event, because it is new, results in one not being prey to memories and desires. In other events it is a conscious act to forget. Hence, privately, I find myself using words such as 'soul' and 'epiphany' to give meaning to experiences.

To conclude: I have tried to set out some of the thoughts that led to a new event within working conferences in the Tavistock (Bion) tradition. Despite my misgivings, I still feel committed to the kind of exploration of the unconscious that working conferences offer. Why? They are one of the few locations in time and space where individuals have a chance to reflect on the connections between private troubles and public issues; the nexus between the individual and society. For me, the experiences of working conferences with their framed events, and now having gone beyond the frame into the praxis event, have offered a glimpse of the roots of creativity of the 'visionary artist' which Jung first described (cf. Day 1973) to enter the heart of darkness.

I end with a seeming paradox: in framing the praxis event, by wresting potential experiences from the interstice between other framed events, I have drawn a contour but, as is known, contours can signify arrest because they involve the acceptance of limits and restraint. But, in fact, as George Eliot observes in the Finale to *Middlemarch*: 'Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending'.

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to Mrs Eleanor Armstrong of the Adult Department in the Tavistock Clinic who first pointed out this distinction to me.
- 2 The psychological artist is one who derives his material from 'the sphere of conscious human experience — from the psychic foreground of life' (Day 1973: 467).

- 3 I am glad to acknowledge the encouragement to try new ideas by, first, Georges Gueron who was then director of Les Conseillers de Synthèse, and Angela Curtis (now Norris) who always in her role of conference administrator gave me space to make forays into the unknown; and, third, to the members and staff who engaged with the conference and the event.
- 4 Derek Raffaelli, Psychologist, Scottish List D Schools, Edinburgh.

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