

# The World Event: A New Design for the Study of Intergroup Behaviour in Group Relations Conferences

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## Abstract

In this paper we introduce a new group relations conference design for working with differences among groups. The basic conference design of small and large study groups is maintained, but given new titles that seem to better describe the work of the events. The central focus of the conference design offered is on a different approach to the Institutional Event, where groups are traditionally given the task to look closely at representation, leadership and authority. The new event is called the World Event, which works as a parallel structure with the conference management. We provide a conceptual framework for the development of the design, describe the design, provide some narratives of our experiences in two conferences, and then offer implications for future work.

*Key words:* Representation, leadership, intergroup differences, group relations conferences, institutional event.

Rice (1965), in his seminal book, *Learning for Leadership*, provided a basic framework for working with group and intergroup differences. He stated:

In short, the basic conference method is to construct situations in which the conventional defence against recognizing or acting on interpretations and intergroup hostilities and rivalries are either removed or at least reduced. This permits examination of the forces at work. The method consists therefore of lowering the barriers to the expression of feeling, both friendly and hostile; providing opportunities for the continuous check on one's own

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feelings, and for comparing them with those of others, about given situations. Or, to put it another way, it is to check fantasy against reality. (p. 73)

While a few authors have written about diversity in group relations conferences (Noumair, Fenichel and Fleming, 1992; Reed and Noumair, 2000; Skolnick and Green, 2004; McRae, Kwong and Short, 2007), little has been done to further the conference design and method to adapt to what might be described as the new world order. By the new world order, we refer to the shifting power relations between groups who in the past had less or no power and authority. In this paper we introduce a new group relations conference design for working with differences among groups. The basic conference design of small and large study groups is maintained, but given new titles that seem to better describe the work of the events. The central focus of the conference design offered is on the Intergroup and Institutional Event, where groups look closely at representation, leadership and authority. We provide a conceptual framework for the development of the design, describe the design, provide some narratives of our experiences in two conferences and then offer implications for future work.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### *Working with differences*

Every transaction between two or more people depends upon (1) the unique personalities of the individuals, (2) the messages the individuals receive and internalize from their own group, and (3) the present and historical relationships between the groups that the individuals represent. (Alderfer, 1994, p. 221)

This quote characterizes the various levels of organizational processes – intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, intergroup and the group as a whole (Wells, 1990) – in the perspective of group differences such as race, ethnicity, culture, religion, social class, sexual orientation and disability. The messages can be riddled with stereotypes, hidden assumptions and prejudices, as well as positive thoughts and feelings about self, group, and those outside of the identified group. There are also historical relationships of struggle between racial and ethnic groups that contemporary members choose to keep alive, or they decide that the past struggle is no longer relevant given the current conditions and situation.

Working with differences in groups and organizations involves recognizing the existence of multiple social identities held by individuals, some being more salient than others given the context. For exam-

ple, women belong to a number of identity groups: gender, racial-ethnic, social class, sexual identity and religious groups. Based on context one identity may become more salient than another. We also need to recognize that there are times when social identity has little to do with decisions that are justifiably grounded in merit, experience and wisdom. The ability to embrace the complexity of the coexistence of multiple identities and differences *and* the ways in which they impact the functioning of the group and/or organization is primary in today's world. The conceptual framework for working with differences, as stated above, was a part of the basic conference structure discussed by Rice in 1965. The conference structure was developed with the idea of working with different perspectives among groups, providing opportunities for the feelings, unspoken assumptions and stereotypes attributed to differences to surface and be available for examination and study. The fact that the group relations model is geared to the study of authority and leadership in groups and organizations makes the study of social identity differences even more pressing. What is the relationship between who has authority, who takes up leadership roles and the racial, ethnic and other differences that define reference groups? Miller (1979) warned that every transaction across boundaries of political identity has the potential for disaster. He purported that there is a fantasized boundary between how a person sees 'me' and 'not me' that may not stand the test of reality. Each time there is an interface between two people from different backgrounds there is a risk of being forced to re-introject the bad bits that have been projected to the other and to surrender the good parts that have been introjected. According to Miller the differences between individuals from various groups are not properties of the system, but are constantly being negotiated. Intergroup relations involve a constant process of patterns of power and coercion on the one hand and bargaining and cooperation on the other.

*Identity, representation and authorization*

Each member of the group represents multiple identities and may represent a number of groups. In groups and organizations individuals are put forward to represent groups; sometimes these are work groups, and other times they are groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, status in organization, disability or thematic ideas. However, at times a person may come without the intention of representing one subgroup but, by virtue of the perceptions of others, are unintentionally expected to represent another of their identity groups. So, as a black woman, the first author

may go to a meeting to represent her university as a professor, but find that she is really there to represent African-American academics, a group that she may or may not feel authorized to represent. Individuals who represent identity groups meet at the boundary that separates them from other groups (McRae, Kwong and Short, 2007).

The boundaries that exist between groups can be impermeable or permeable, depending on historical relationships, hidden agendas, stereotypes, belief systems, values, etc. Intolerance of differences, ambiguity, paradox and multiple realities lock groups in paranoid-schizoid relations and make it difficult to work across boundaries (Skolnick and Green, 2004). At times there is a value or currency attributed to being either oppressed or privileged. Reed and Noumair (2000) refer to the currency of victimhood in diversity conferences and the 'myth of redress', as a regressive process where members operate as if resources and power will be reapportioned in an equitable manner. Identity and representation in groups require risking the potential effects of joining with others who are 'not me' and the possibilities of collaboration and conflict. There are risks involved in having authentic dialogue about and across differences that create a sense of vulnerability and insecurity (Connolly and Noumair, 1997; McRae, Kwong and Short, 2007).

Being authorized to take up a role of leadership in a group or organization can be both exciting and difficult. It is exciting because it is usually an indication of others' trust and respect for ones' capacity to take up such an important role. It is difficult because, as Turquet (1985) states,

The complication for leadership is that, like the psychoanalytic model of ego, it has to be Janus-like, looking both internally and externally, becoming both participant and observer. If the leader allows himself to become an observer gliding above the fray as a non-participant, he will deprive himself of knowledge of certain vital aspects of the group's activities. Hence, he will lose much of his evidence about the state of the group and especially the group's expectation with regard to his leadership. (p. 73)

According to Turquet, leadership emerges out of the needs and aspirations of the group and is expressed through the action of single members or a set of members. So long as the members of the group continue to reflect and act in accordance with the group's spoken and unconscious desires, they will continue to hold on to their leadership roles. The degree to which salient identity features of the group are also present in the one(s) who hold the leadership determines the likelihood of the group allowing the occasional lapse or failure. Those who are able to tap into the needs of the group but who are more

distant in identity will more readily find that their leadership roles are challenged if not stripped away.

The difficulty for the representative of a group is to maintain multiple connections between the group being represented and the new group that is joined. Rice (1969) reminds us that 'Indeed, unless the boundary of the group of representatives becomes stronger than the boundaries that join the representative to those they represent; there is little hope of successful negotiations' (p. 582). When the representative group feels that the representative no longer relates to its basic needs, it will withdraw authorization of that role or demonstrate less respect for the authority of the person in the role.

The world of differences is complex and thus not easily classifiable into simplistic boxes. The World Event was designed to create space for the exploration of multiple differences and tools to enhance skill levels in working within and across differences related to leadership and authority in groups and organizations. Greater emphasis is placed on how differences in the level of representation among the members change the nature of authority relations. As such the World Event seeks to mirror contemporary authority relations by giving members the opportunity to choose their own World Forum, which functions semi-autonomously in the context of the overall conference. In contrast to the Institutional Event, which the World Event replaces, members find themselves in a relationship with a chosen authority of their fellow members and the management authority of the staff. This additional level of complexity expands the interpretive lens and range of metaphors for staff and members alike.

Originally designed with the idea of the Security Council within the UN General Assembly in mind, the World Event may also evoke imagery of other kinds of authority relations. The conference management could be seen as akin to a board of directors that retains oversight of a non-profit organization. The World Forum would then be the leadership team and its executive director who attends to day-to-day operations of the non-profit organization. The groups formed by the members may well be like departments, business units and task teams. Another analogy may be the structure of many universities where there is often the university administration, faculty senate and the academic departments. Similarly, differences in cultural groups within a given societal context may be more visible in how groups are formed and roles are adopted in the World Event. What is key is that differences in authority are made more available for study through the design of the World Event, giving members more opportunity to learn from the experience.

### THE WORLD EVENT: CONFERENCE DESIGN

Conceptually, the focus was to create a conference that moved beyond 'honouring diversity.' This term for us had begun to lose meaning, and was often reduced to politically correct language and familiar catch-phrases. Our concern from a design perspective at the time of the first conference was how we might move 'diversity' from becoming simply a cliché term to once more representing a robust way to approach working with human difference. As such, 'embracing a world of difference' came to entail the possibility of staff and members working to connect consciously and unconsciously on more than what could be easily seen or expressed as identity. In other words, for a member to speak of being a 'gay, black or male', while an important and necessary first step of exploration, could no longer be seen as providing more than a cursory understanding of the individual, the group with which he identifies, or some presumed known process that accompanies this cluster of identities. The challenge for staff and members alike was to see more.

The World Event grew out of Zachary Green's experiences at international conferences such as FLAM and TransformAction. He also noted differences in how the Praxis Event, Intergroup Event, and Institutional Event were conceptualized and managed in these and other conferences outside the USA. We also understand that an international symposium held in Australia in the mid 1990s that pre-dated the Belgirate series included sessions that were also termed the World Event. The nature and intention of that event seems to have been to provide the organizations representing each of the countries present with an opportunity to work across their boundaries. The implicit aim was to begin to understand the similarities and differences the national cohorts brought to the world of group relations. The event was a one-time offering for which there is no apparent record of its outcomes or evidence that it was subsequently used or adapted for other symposia or conferences.

#### *Background of authors*

The first author, Mary McRae, selected and authorized Zachary Green, the second author, to design a conference that highlighted intergroup relations and representation and to direct it for two years. He in turn brought the third author, Bruce Irvine, on board to work from a broad concept to deepen the working details for the Institutional Event of the conference. The basic aim was to create an event that increased the representational authority of members, flattened the hierarchy within the conference between staff and members, and increased our capacity to study difference.

Our backgrounds are very different and have enhanced our work together. Mary is an African American who comes from a sharecropper background; her family worked the crops of whites in the segregated south. Zachary is an African American whose family is upper class; his father was a professional athlete who leveraged his sports career into a successful, highly lucrative business, and his mother was a teacher. Bruce is white, and was born and grew up in apartheid South Africa; he is the son of a Methodist minister. Following his studies at a university in South Africa, he became active in the political struggle and came into exile in the UK. He has lived in London for the past twenty-two years.

Both conferences were titled 'Embracing a World of Difference: Exploring and Transforming Authority Relations'. Paradoxically, the purpose of the entire 'embracing' approach is to allow for more potential points of connection to be named, explored and worked. The challenge of the 'Embracing Differences' theme in conducting a group relations conference or any other such explorations is that known narratives that have served people for life become challenged and often altered. This is especially true for narratives that explained things in terms of gender, race, orientation, nationality, or other such categories. Through our approach in the 'Embracing Differences' series, our effort was to broaden identity analysis in group relations conferences once more, moving it beyond diversity as a cliché. The test was whether the design brought a difference to how members took up roles and authority, and to whether staff found new ways to see the groups and offer interpretation.

#### *Primary task of the World Event (WE)*

Akin to the traditional Intergroup and Institutional Event in group relations conferences, the primary task of the World Event remains to study the relationships between and among groups, including a conference management that works in public session. The difference comes in how the World Event invites members to study issues of leadership and representation through the formation of the World Forum. This designated body, composed of ambassadors representing each group or constituent community, works as a complementary and/or parallel structure with the conference management. While the conference management retains authority and responsibility for the overall conference boundary, the World Forum, once formed, assumes primary authority for the World Event. Conference management provides a team of consultants available for the member groups formed, as well as the ambassadors and management.

Conceptually, the World Event sets out to simulate the opportunities and tensions present in the nested authority relationships commonplace in the post-modern world. Parallels may be seen in how individual governments of sovereign nations relate to entities such as the United Nations or European Union. Each nation has its own relationship to the world while having representation in a world or continental body. In both realms there are efforts to influence the nature of global discourse through laws, resolutions, policies, treaties and accords. Tensions arise when the direction of world bodies clashes with those of given nations, especially those with strong economic, military, natural resources and/or political power. Below, we explain the various components of the World Event.

#### *World Forum*

The World Forum is authorized to set policies for the World Event in accordance with the primary task of the conference. They may also offer hypotheses about the nature and meaning of the emerging conference institution. With control over the resource of the plenary room, they also have the authority to convene groups and negotiate use of the space for groups who seek to hold intergroup meetings in 'neutral' territory. In these ways the members of the groups gradually recognize over time that they have given over a significant degree of authority to the World Forum. The need for linkage to and communication from the individual ambassadors of groups becomes palpable, often resulting in threats of recall. Such issues often challenge the World Forum and its ability to function continuously as a representative body.

As a representative leadership forum of participant members that leads and manages participant members' work in the World Event, the World Forum puts into place an organizational structure that gives meaning to the experience. When functioning optimally, the leadership of the World Forum promotes a spirit of inquiry into the myths and realities of group and intergroup experience in the World Event. How they communicate with the groups in their process of forming, framing and testing working hypotheses (those of the groups and that of the World Forum) influences the depth of learning and potential for transformation.

#### *Staff roles*

The staff work in three different, nested role structures to facilitate the work of members in the World Event. Unlike the way in which such relatedness is often presented in the traditional institutional event,

great emphasis is placed on how each staff role in the World Event is an extension of delegation from conference management. The structures consist of the following.

- A conference institution management team is made up of the conference directorate and the team leaders of the 'here-and-now' events. The management team retains authority over the boundary of the conference as a whole. They offer hypotheses and work with the World Event groups about the emerging meaning of the collective experience. The management team also retains authority over the World Event until and if the World Forum begins to function and accepts the authorization for their role.
- An adviser to the World Forum is appointed by the conference institution management team. In contrast to staff on the consultant team, the adviser serves as an exclusive resource to the World Forum for the entire World Event. The adviser maintains a conference management role while working to support the World Forum in the development of their roles and authority within the World Event. Ideally, the Adviser also maintains regular communication with the conference institutional management team and consultant team, usually through their convener.
- A consultant team is appointed by the conference institution management team. Unlike in the Institutional Event, the consultant team is charged to work with the groups actively and is encouraged to 'market' their services. Through their convener, who also holds a seat on the conference institution management team, a close link is held between the consultant team and the management team. Further, once the World Forum is formed, they may seek to deploy the consultant team to carry out tasks, so long as they are consistent with the overall aims and primary task of the World Event and conference as a whole. Groups may also directly request consultation.

In this model, once the members have formed their groups and moved into an authorized space, the first task of the consultant team is to work with the group(s) present to choose their ambassador for the World Forum. Groups may negotiate with the consultant team to retain services to help them with their work in the World Event. As with the Institutional Event, all staff are plenipotentiaries and are charged with continued task of collective conference management.

#### *Creating the groups/communities*

In the opening plenary for the World Event members are free to create groups, also called constituent communities. They can create groups

with an emphasis on the issues of representation of similar or mixed social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation or other groupings of their own choosing. While asked to keep in mind the theme of the conference and issues of salient identity, members are not required to adhere or be restricted to these considerations. This approach allows themes that are 'here and now' in the consciousness of members to emerge in the World Event. Once the groups are formed, they choose an ambassador to represent them in the World Forum. Representation in the World Forum, however, is limited to groups where two or more members gather in a space assigned by conference management.

Through the help of the consultants, the groups affirm the group's/ community's name, focus of work and location. They are encouraged to share this information with the conference management team, other World Event groups/communities and the World Forum. This more directive approach to the beginning of the event is to promote greater boundary permeability and launch a more robust exploration of mutual and nested relatedness in the emerging system. As such ambassadors are able to enter the World Forum with an idea of the core of what they are representing and are at the same time a holographic representation of the whole of the membership. Similarly, the World Forum is better equipped to begin its work of managing the event and developing hypotheses with a sense of what the overall system is saying at this genesis. This thinking is an adaptation from advances in integral theory (Wilber, 1997). Rather than being a view of groups and systems as separate or interrelated entities, this conceptual framework suggests the importance of a holographic view of experiences and events. In addition to thinking about a group as a voice of the whole, as is common in group relations practice, integral theory invites us to think that each voice and each group *is* the whole.

Structurally, the World Forum consists of a maximum number of ambassadors that should not exceed the number of assigned authorized spaces for the World Event. Among the first tasks of the World Forum is to designate a chair. The chair of World Forum, unless otherwise designated, becomes the primary voice of the group and, through work with the World Forum adviser, establishes a direct link to the conference director to begin the work of negotiating the nature of the relatedness between the World Forum and the conference management. Like the conference management, the work of the World Forum is conducted in public. The term of each of ambassador is for the duration of the World Event, though subject to the policies of their respective communities. While the term of an ambassador may be limited or terminated by a member of the constituent community, so that such

an ambassador no longer represents this group, he or she retains the title of ambassador. Ideally, the World Forum also operates continuously for the scheduled sessions of the World Event to provide constituent communities optimal opportunities for interaction.

#### *Conference institution management team*

The conference institution management team provides collective exploration, leadership and management of the conference institution in parallel with the World Forum which provides participant leadership in the World Event. As with the more traditional Institutional Event, the management team works in public to develop hypotheses for testing to assist in the understanding of intergroup relations

#### *Communicating between groups*

The World Event uses the language of diplomacy for the continuum of delegation and authorization. These designations are used to facilitate communication between groups and are as follows.

- Observer: no voice to participate directly, needs to be from a group/community
- Emissary: offers messages on behalf of a group/community, full authorization from a group/community to negotiate and speak on the group's/community's behalf to develop a statement
- Envoy: fully authorized to act on behalf of a group/community.

#### *Consultant team*

The purpose of the consultant team is to provide member groups and management with an understanding of the intergroup relations, authority, and leadership in the World Event and the conference institution as they are emerging. While *not* open for observation by participant members, the consultant team is available to members to provide consultation on: hypothesis development; meetings between groups/communities; difficulties/challenges within or between groups or communities; requests authorized by a group/community, in negotiation with the consultation team.

#### *Nested authority and the staff*

The World Event relies on clarity of communication at all levels of the event. Accordingly, in the three parallel systems of the staff that func-

tion concurrently, periodic meetings of the adviser to the World Forum, the convener of the consultants and/or a representative from the management team are essential. While it is important to note the potential for competition and more destructive rivalry between the systems, in terms of the primary task, the staff system operates with its own nested authority structure within the World Event. Nested authority is a concept adapted from work in the field of academic leadership and is particular to models of collective leadership (Isaacs, 1999). This leadership perspective attends to the difference between dominance and growth hierarchies, the latter of which have been the more common form studied in group relations conferences. Just as in molecular models where electrons, protons and neutrons are the key elements of an atom and atoms are the key elements of molecules, the hierarchy is nested and necessary for the entire entity to gain form. Similarly, in the World Event, the members, the groups, the World Forum and the conference management can be thought of as a growth hierarchy. This thinking does not negate the likelihood of there being the presence of a dominance hierarchy. It simply provides an additional way to understand the process. The quality of the study of intergroup relations and the capacity of the World Forum to take up its own authority for the event is strongly influenced by the clarity with which the staff are able to work and communicate with nested authority and hold the analogy of a growth hierarchy.

#### *Narratives from conferences*

Below we provide some narratives of what we saw happening during the first two conferences where the World Event was introduced. Both conferences were held at the New York University Conference Centre at the Woolworth Building, which is a few blocks from where the World Trade Centre stood before being blown up. We describe the intergroups formed by the members and some representational issues on the World Forum, and discuss what these groups represented in the conference institution and possibly the world.

#### 2005 CONFERENCE

During the WE the member groups went to the World Forum to observe the ambassadors and very few came to observe or engage with management. Our hypothesis was that there was a wish to go to the World Forum first/in lieu of management in order to maintain disbelief that the members had actually authorized their own representative body. Once they did so, the insurgency began to unseat and

assassinate them. The parallel to Iraq is clear but it is also true of many popular movements when the people gain power and then begin to fight among themselves rather than look at the authorizing and/or colonizing/ oppressing body that created them and/or held them together. The ethnic/tribal battles in places like Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire are examples of this as is the former Yugoslavia. Once the oppressor/colonizer is removed (in this case the management) then the ethnic battle lines emerge. One of the demands of the Skeptics was the removal of their 'ambassador' from the World Forum, as they viewed the authority of that body as illegitimate so long as a member of management (the adviser) remained present. This argument is the same that Sunnis have about the US presence in Iraq.

The first World Event was held at the New York University Conference Centre, housed in the Woolworth Building. The proximity of this new space for the conference in Lower Manhattan, near Wall Street and blocks away from where once stood the World Trade Centre, was in itself evocative. As the conference staff began the joining process, themes of anxiety about working with a new design and consciousness about being one of the first conferences to be held at this site since the events of 9/11 were most prominent. Half of the staff were selected for their experience working at NYU group relations conferences on traditional American issues of diversity such as race, gender and sexual orientation. The remainder represented an international presence where difference often carried different meaning; they were veterans of conference work in Europe, the Middle East and South America. Collectively, there was an understanding expressed that this conference had the potential to be something unlike any one of us had previously encountered.

Sixty-seven members entered the space with the opening music of 'That's the Way of the World' by Earth, Wind and Fire playing in the background. The managing director spoke of the conference aim of embracing a world of difference and began to weep. Other staff and many of the members mirrored his tears. At the end of his opening statement, one of the members stated that he hoped that tears were not a prerequisite for working in the conference and surmised that perhaps the conference represented a generational transition in group relations work in the USA. The tears, he said, could be seen as mourning the loss in order to make room to embrace what was to become.

The small study event was recast as the System Exploration Event (SEE). While remaining focused on the 'here-and-now,' the aim was shifted slightly so that less emphasis was placed on authority relations and more importance was given to developing the capacity of the group to become more aware of the multiple levels of lived experience

present. This approach took the staff to the edge of their competence, as their familiar ways of working and interpreting the behaviour of members required new language and a different quality of engagement. One staff member noted that the role of the consultant became more permeable in this model. He did not realize how much he had been using his role as a shield against experience. The aim of helping the group 'see' without immediately turning their attention to his authority meant he was exploring more mutuality in the exploration alongside them. While eventually freeing, the initial experience felt unfamiliar and even unwanted.

Similarly the large study group became the Matrix of Realities Event (MORE). While the task remained for the group to study its lived experience, attention was given to the multiple realities that were offered. Consultants worked to hold the different voices and different stories with the aim of interpreting from a stance that offered more woven interpretations. The effort, indeed, was to embrace the differences rather than only point to divisive and divergent themes. Borrowing from 'Listening Post' groups, the MORE sessions were seen as one continuous experience (Nahum, 2005). As such the 'here and now' could readily include references of an earlier session and still be considered on task. Staff noted that this stance, from a subjective perspective, promoted a fuller range of experience to emerge and to be explored.

The experiences in the 'here-and-now' sessions prepared the staff and members to enter the World Event with an orientation to what was beginning to emerge in this particular conference. For more than half of the members, this was their first experience of any group relations conference. In contrast, the staff and more experienced members found themselves encountering continuous subtle shifts in their grounding that challenged their familiar notions about group relations orthodoxy. Unlike the Institutional Event, for which the World Event is largely a replacement, the opening is marked by the presence of all staff and members. The seating marks a differentiation in roles of the staff from the conference opening. Correspondingly, the seating of the members is configured differently as a structural metaphor for the change of events.

It is important to note that this approach was not consciously or deliberately planned at the first World Event. One staff member asked the managing director whether there was any particular rationale for having the consultants sit in their assigned rooms rather than be present at the opening. The decision was then taken to deploy the consultants and the management team from the opening space, thereby creating an opportunity for transparency in the process and modelling the differentiation that was to be asked of the members.

The members, in addition to hearing the description and task of the World Event, were provided with a briefing that outlined the aim and elements. Particular attention was given to the explanation of the first session, the selection of ambassadors, the ongoing work of the constituent community groups that were to be formed and the role of the World Forum. Once the managing director completed the opening and took questions, the associate director, convener of the consultant team and adviser to the World Forum remained present to act as consultant(s) to the group formation. In contrast to the Institutional Event (IE), the emphasis is placed less on the 'break-up' and more on what is created. Similarly, the kind of mutual projections that is common to staff in the management/consultant split of many IEs is replaced with an emphasis on developing a shared collective understanding by the management, consultants and adviser of how the membership chose to form its groups. In a like manner, while the consultants remain focused on working with whatever happens in the authorized space to which they are assigned, they are charged to be proactive in helping whatever groups present to develop criteria and select an ambassador to the World Forum. This task is seen as being conducted along with consulting the group on its formation, boundaries and task.

These conditions for implementing the design were carried out according to plan. What followed was the lived experience of the event in the context of a group relations conference. Indeed, for the first session there appeared to be little difference between this World Event and an Institutional Event, with the exception of naming ambassadors. Groups formed, gave themselves names, and made efforts to understand what they represented on behalf of the conference. Similarly, consultants reported data to the managing director and the institutional management team began to craft early elements of a hypothesis.

There were six member groups formed during the opening plenary:

- Diversity Within;
- Exploring/Embracing the Multiple Dimensional Self;
- Dialogue Across the Racial Divide in the Gay and Lesbian Community;
- Finding and Unearthing Conflict (FUC);
- Sexuality Dialogue;
- The Sceptics.

Furthermore, the differences between the World Event and the Institutional Event were difficult to discern in the behaviour of the staff or members. By the second session, the institutional conference

management team was unable to determine what level of relationship it saw itself as having with the World Forum. The managing director and the adviser to the World Forum had no direct contact to work on differences in how the role was developing because of the use of another member of staff as a liaison between the forum, management team and consultant team. Similarly, the consultant team, uncertain of their mandate and unable to agree on their level of pro-activity, remained in their territory, not offering any report to management about their process. Meanwhile in the membership, the 'Dialogue' group reported to management that it was indeed holding dialogues with other member groups. Their plenipotentiary was interpreted by management to represent the longing for the director in the membership, as he mirrored the managing director in race, sexual orientation, physique and stance.

Scepticism, confusion and doubt about the design began to be voiced in management. Frustration was also mounting in management about the absence of interaction with the consulting team. First attempts at meeting with the World Forum also revealed that they had not yet begun to function or take up leadership in the event. They had named their chair, a young Latino graduate student, but had not discovered their role.

As the World Event flowed into the third session, the IE nature of the event continued. Groups began to report their initial hypotheses to the management as management struggled to discover its own. A report then came in from the liaison that the Sceptics group was present in the World Forum space, was demanding that the adviser vacate and planned to barricade the doors if action were not taken.

Then the lights went out – literally. As many of the authorized territories were interior rooms with no windows, much of the conference space was in complete darkness. The metaphor of the moment was not lost on management. The managing director immediately deployed an administrator to contact building security about the situation, another member of the team to charge the consultants with going to each of the authorized spaces to inform the groups that the situation was being addressed, and the associate director to determine what was going on at the World Forum. The lights were out for less than ten minutes. It seemed to management that it was more like an hour. A member of the consultant team reported 'the Sceptics stormed the World Forum and were holding the adviser hostage. We also think they orchestrated this "terrorist attack" and turned off the lights!'

Once the lights were back on, the managing director and the chair of the World Forum immediately met. The two of them agreed to call a meeting with a representative of all the groups. The consultant team

also was asked by the World Forum to work with each group about their experience of the moments of darkness. The chair and the managing director opened the meeting with brief statements akin to how the leaders of two nations or organizations joined in collaborative work may begin a dialogue with a shared constituency. The task to determine the meaning of 'what happened' and 'how to go forward' was placed before the group. What was discovered was a projection into the Sceptics, who reported that they had indeed gone to the World Forum to demand the ouster of the adviser, but had not turned off the lights. Labels, such as 'Taliban' and 'terrorists', were used to describe them and their actions. Indeed, there was deep scepticism voiced that the Sceptics were not responsible for the action. The anger, fear and confusion expressed limited the capacity for this group to give meaning to the experience or determine a collective path forward. The meeting was adjourned, with the chair and the managing director agreeing to work in parallel and to meet again to develop a shared hypothesis about the experience.

From this point forward, the event became the World Event. The World Forum took charge of assuring that each group developed some understanding of their role in the overall event as well as their interpretation of the meaning of the crisis. They invited each of the member groups, the consultant team and the management team into the closing plenary of the World Event. They took responsibility for setting up the space, opening the session and sharing their own hypothesis as well as thoughts reflecting the collective perspectives of management and the World Forum.

Though tensions were still quite high, the evidence that scepticism was held in different groups and within the staff found voice. The darkness reactivated for some members their recent experiences of 9/11, with two members having been in the towers on that fateful day. It also spoke to many who were afraid to look beyond familiar patterns that they could readily see, especially in terms of issues of diversity and identity. Ironically, the darkness revealed how blind they could be to the experience of others different from themselves. Some members of staff were in tears when they saw the members take up their leadership and own the authority to manage the event. It was also evident that the member groups learned to work beyond their own scepticism to work with the authority of their World Forum. In the end a new event had begun.

At the conference closing plenary, the need to blame and assign responsibility reigned for some time. In time, it became clear that what had been activated and enacted was the terror and trauma that remained present for many residents of New York City. The World

Event activated the unconscious aspects of this true world event in a way that global differences were found, not outside in the sands of some foreign land, but inside each of us. In this experience, those from another city and another professional orientation became the 'other' who was blamed for bringing the violence and the terror. In the end, to our dismay most of us gained the insight that the darkness that had been cast upon us was also inside each of us.

Some months later, we learned that the conference centre lights are on an automatic timer on the weekends. At half past seven on Saturday evenings the lights go out. In follow-up meetings with members who participated in research interviews about the conference, we informed them of this fact. Many continued to believe that it had been a 'terror attack' by our conference members. Nothing could convince them otherwise.

#### 2006 CONFERENCE

The groups formed during the WE were: The Asian Experience; Theories of Change; Not Interested in Courteous Exchange (NICE); A Place at the Table (Gay and Lesbian Group); DAAMN – Social Justice; Here and Now; and Older People Making an Impact. Each of these groups represented different aspects of what the members and staff were bringing to and engaging in during the conference. Again, the WF encouraged members to experiment directly with issues of authority/authorization, delegation and representation. The result of this was best seen in the way the forum members successfully and creatively collaborated with staff over the design of the closing plenary discussion. In this conference roles of member groups and consultant staff were more clearly defined and we extended the number of events to really make the WE the centre of the conference. Members were provided with a WE briefing note in their folders and we carefully chose to invite a number of staff from the prior conference who were now familiar with the new design.

The World Forum chair happened to be a Croatian who was devoutly religious. His role outside of the conference also just happened to be of someone who acted internationally to safeguard the lives of members of his profession in potentially hostile environments. At the final plenary he came dressed in jacket and tie, consciously so that he could leave the conference soon after its conclusion to attend an Easter ceremony common to his ethnic group. Unconsciously, he stood before the membership, from which he had arisen to this role of authority, in a manner that conveyed it. The major issue that he faced in his role was the management of a divided membership that sought

equity of voice for all parties. Much of his time was devoted to forging a solution to a situation where there were eight representatives elected to the World Forum but only seven seats recognized by the conference management. In the end the eighth voice was elevated to the role of process observer for the World Forum, having voice to comment on the emerging process in the plenary. This role paralleled that of the adviser to the World Forum on the management side of the boundary. The solution satisfied all parties and peace, for the moment, was established.

As chair, he opened the World Event plenary alongside the director. Offering a hypothesis that spoke to the elusive social order that was sought, the process invited challenges from voices that felt silenced and devalued. Meeting these assaults with a blend of diplomacy and sharp rebuke, the chair spoke of the ongoing fight to provide voice for all groups while acting to represent the whole. Literally, in the final moment, a female voice not heard previously began to speak of how the World Forum could only hear certain voices because its own focus on representation failed to engage the membership in its evolving process. The accent in her halting voice suggested an Eastern European origin. As the issue she was making the effort to voice was approaching a substantive point, the time boundary that the chair had been charged to manage for the plenary was also rapidly approaching. He faced a dilemma. If he allowed her to finish her point, surely the time boundary would be missed and he would, in essence, abandon the responsibility of his role. If he called the time boundary, some parties would see him as brutal and dictatorial, and insensitive to assuring that all voices were fully heard. As the director, responsible for the overall management of overall conference boundaries and the final container for the plenary, prepared to intervene, the chair spoke. 'We are at the time boundary,' he said and he stood marking the end of the session. The woman who was speaking at this critical moment was Serbian.

Whether rightly or wrongly, on behalf of the membership, the chair upheld the requirements of his role and experienced directly and intensely the tyranny of authority. Immediately after the session he and his colleague from the former Yugoslavia were seen to be in a sharp and protracted exchange with each other. Later, in application sessions, each reported how the issues of voice and boundaries were the key Croatian and Serbian issues. The fact that in a session called the World Event this issue so markedly affecting their world half a world away could be presented to them and all others with such conscious clarity was remarkable.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The World Event is an innovative design that is in line with Rice's (1969) premise concerning the conference method as creating a space for 'intergroup hostilities and rivalries' to surface and providing opportunities for the expression of both friendly and hostile feelings to be examined. As the world changes the group relations model must adapt in ways that recognize the diverse citizens of the world and explore important issues that confront us in the world we live in. It involves working with multiple differences at multiple levels, and working with complexity in a way that relates to the daily experiences that exist in the organizations and the world that we work in.

In the WE, at the 2005 conference, the dominant theme was about the splitting of the groups. The names of the groups formed by the members (Dialogue Across the Racial Divide in the Gay and Lesbian Community, Finding and Unearthing Conflict (FUC), Sexuality Dialogue and the Sceptics) suggest the unconscious splitting that then occurred in the event. It should be of no surprise that the law students formed the Sceptics and all the other groups consisted mainly of mental-health students or professionals. The members split themselves into groups that recognized differences and conflict, created sexual dialogue, which can be loving and/or aggressive and abusive, and then those who were doubtful. If we consider group as a whole theory, each group represents an aspect of the whole institution. This was the first conference using this design that engaged members in not only dividing themselves into groups, but also choosing a representative as an ambassador, a group who had the power to make decisions for the entire membership. The directorate of the conference was predominantly African American and female, with an openly gay man, a white South African and one white American female. Perhaps the differences represented by the staff fostered the splitting of the members along those lines. One question that surfaced was: Could an organization really embrace the differences that existed among us as a staff and membership?

This conference offered the most difficult test for the directorate and the consulting staff which is one of holding and managing boundaries *and* containment. The staff did not panic when the lights went out. The director quickly asked the administrator to call building security to find out the nature of the problem and to resolve it as quickly as possible. He asked the associate director to meet with the Sceptics group; he asked another member of the directorate to meet with the head of the consultant team and to deploy consultants to the various member territories quickly. He went to meet with the ambassadors. The lights

were only out for about five minutes and all of these actions were taken in that time span. When the lights were on and member groups were checked to make sure that all were okay, the work of the event resumed. The clarity of the authority structure, roles, boundaries and tasks by the directorate and their swift actions demonstrated to the members and staff that the environment was safe enough to work in and continue to explore.

The theme for the WE in the 2006 conference was about authority, voice and boundary. When working with social identity differences voice and boundary are significant concerns. The question of who has the power and authority to set and manage boundaries, who sets the agenda for the meetings and who has the authority to voice concerns without fear of reprimand or retaliation become central. The groups formed represented social identity groups (Asian, gay and lesbian, age), social justice issues (NICE, DAAMN) or group relations concepts (theories of change, here and now) that are closely related to social justice concerns. These groups represent many groups that are attempting to give voice to issues related to walls of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and the desire for acknowledgement and change. The authority issue was framed in the members' request for eight rather than seven ambassadors. They spent much of the event trying to negotiate with management to increase the number of seats. When denied their request, they found a way to work within the confines of the guidelines to give voice to the group that could not appoint an ambassador. The chair of the World Forum taking up his role, coordinating the set up of the plenary and working with the director on managing the event demonstrated an understanding of roles, representation and authority.

One of the lessons learned was the difference between identity and representation. The ambassadors represented different identity groups and the chair of the World Forum represented all members. There were multiple identities held by each individual in each of the groups. Representing any one voice can be difficult and complex: Which do you represent, and when and how are the groups represented? Representation is most often about vision, ideology and values. It is broader than identity groups in that the representative must be able to work within and across boundaries of difference.

As we move towards a globally interconnected world, an understanding of local communities and identity groups remains important. However, we must also consider the common purpose of the dawning global community if we are to participate in determining nature and implementing this future. The world requires its representatives to take up more functional roles as opposed to merely personal roles. The

functional roles require working to aim and task rather than to person or identity group. The task of group relations in these times is to remain a relevant representative vehicle for exploring the unconscious and systemic processes present in human discourse. Our conference model must, therefore, evolve more fully to reflect the emerging nature of how we relate to one another in terms of role and task as well as how we understand each other across difference. The World Event reveals the world as it is for us to learn anew. We must now be prepared to see more.

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