

The Aesthetics of Group Relations – Design, leadership and the art of learning in contemporary GR thinking and practice

Eliat Aram – for AK Rice Symposium, October 2010

I feel privileged and honoured to speak in front of you today, some of you I know from GR in Europe, or from when you joined the community at Belgirate, or when you came as members to Leicester, which I have directed in the last 4 years.

I have never yet worked in the USA on a GR conference and in preparation for today's talk and also for participation in this symposium I went back to the GR Reader to read a few chapters again and also spoken to some colleagues who have been around long enough to remember those early days. I then decided to go into some of the Institute's archived boxes and brought with me the early GRC brochures from 1969 to 1979 to give you a flavour of those early days of the AKRI conferences- for those of you who are less familiar with its history and development, and for those of you who might feel a little nostalgic...

I intend to link my talk to the title of the symposium, questioning the place and timeliness of GR conference and other application work in the world today, a re-surgery of GR using my experiences of directing the TIHR flagship GRC, based in the UK, The Leicester conference, applying a different angle of thinking about GR.

I will start from a brief description of where the TIHR is today, because I think that as the Institute's chief executive and the director of Leicester at the same time, what happens in one is intricately linked to what is happening in the other.

The TIHR today is best described as a not-for-profit social science enterprise dedicated to the study of human relations for the purpose of bettering working life and conditions for all humans within their organisations, communities and broader societies. The institute's body of employees consists of a wide range of social science educated practitioners, who come from psychology, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychotherapy, social economics, organisational studies, political science, publishing, studies of Arts including creative arts and history of Arts and more recently social media.

The TIHR has a history of working with organizations and sectors that are required to look at systemic questions to achieve greater and more effective change. One way of describing its *raison d'être*, if you like, is to improve insight and provide opportunities for learning so that quality of conversation and engagement is improved across organisations and their communities.

You can immediately see that the method of Group Relations is at the heart and soul of this task, which we can describe also as: to go beneath the surface of tensions and conflicts, in order that deeper fears and aspirations are worked through and people feel that

they are adding value to and having more ownership of their organisations and the communities they serve and are part of. The forces that affect individual and collective behaviours are drawn out whilst holding in mind notions of complex systems as well as institutional resistances and defences.

You can see that it is an ongoing grappling, which to an extent can never be resolved and is continually negotiable, debatable, political, changeable, movable...

Why do we do this work of consulting and participating in GR, in a task which is relentlessly inconclusive?

Margaret Rioch's question from 1985- why I work as a consultant – is still a relevant question, probably will be an ongoing question to ponder on for another 40 or more years of GR work – and in this talk today I would like to give you a simple, straight forward and possibly slightly unusual reply to this question –

- Because GR method is a work of art
- Because it is a collective work of art, which emerges in the here-and-now, is entirely dependent upon the involvement and engagement of the participants that constitute it in their different roles
- Because in GR we must involve both our passion and our intellect, our spiritual unknowing selves as well as our rational knowing beings
- Because of the sense of kinship and community that has developed around the world across the GR organisations and individual practitioners

- Because the what we create together in a GRC is simply quite beautiful, albeit always painful and difficult
- Its beauty also is in it being a temporary creation yet lasting and memorable at the same time, and has to be re-created in the here-and-now, a bit like a piece of music

I suggest that Group Relations is an art which emerges as an aesthetic practice in the here-and-now work of the conference as a temporary institution and it is this quality that gives it, at least in part, its long lasting impact, its broad application capacity and also its charm, its appeal, and you might even think of it as its magnetism.

As you know, art and aesthetics are extensively written about. In my talk I will draw only on a selection of philosophers, artists and scholars who have conceptualised and theorised about these concepts.

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), the famed Russian novelist, discusses what is art in a paper of this title, where he argues that in order to correctly define art, it is necessary first of all, to stop considering it as a means to pleasure (which is one of the most commonplace definitions of art) and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Every work of art, he says, causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who simultaneously, previously or subsequently, receive that same artistic impression. It is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feelings and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based. Art, for Tolstoy, is a medium for communicating and evoking feelings.

I think this is a wonderful description of a GRC:

A medium for communicating and evoking feelings.

This definition then draws our attention to three important and linked elements:

- the form, or the artefact: the conference design including its events, time, breaks, movement to and from different events etc
- the attitude of the consultants to the work, including their relationship to the members, to the design and to the task
- the experience in the here-and-now practice of the conference temporary institution, its application and implication

I will start with the form, the container, or one key artefact of the GR (art) work: the conference design (or by extension, the design of an organisational development intervention or a leadership development consultation, which I have discussed elsewhere).

Over the last few years I have become increasingly interested in the process of design, and its range of meanings - from planning and structuring based on linear thinking where a high degree of certainty is assumed, to an increasingly emergent design process, which is more readily linked to art and creativity, to creativity and spirituality, to visceral and bodily responses and observations to do with shape,

pattern, flow, movement, space, location, rhythm and so on – more of that later.

I believe that working with a framework of participative/emergent design in GR (as well as in OD more generally) suits better an uncertain and complex reality of the kind we live in today, or at least we feel and experience it as more complex than before, mainly because of technology and globalisation, where linear principles do not apply in the same way, or are not even very useful.

I want to say a few words to differentiate more clearly between ‘linear’ and ‘non-linear’ thinking and its application to planning and designing.

When I talk about ‘linear design’ I am pointing to a particular set of assumptions:

1. an organisational hierarchy where the decision making is at the top and so is the accountability (at least where ethical practice is in place)
2. enough certainty to assume that action-plan A will lead to result B
3. self belief and self confidence of the leader at a level of self sufficiency, or in other words,
4. planning which is centred on the individual

When I talk about ‘emergent or participative design’ I am pointing to a different set of assumptions:

1. an organisation which is more aware of its informal hierarchy, perhaps has a different image of itself, such as a network, although at the same time would recognise that the formal hierarchy has ultimately the accountability for the results
2. recognising that there is high degree of uncertainty around us which means that our planning might only be incremental, needs to be open to changes and adaptable and may even require fundamental change to it

To achieve this we require:

3. a culture of collaboration and participation
4. leader with enough self resource and trust in colleagues to know that we can work towards the plan 'together'
5. in other words, planning which is centred on the system of the group or groups

This is what Margaret Rioch said in her paper 'why I work as a consultant' in the second GR Reader, on p 373:

"It has sometimes seemed to me that the conferences are a marvellous way to demonstrate the inter-relatedness of events and to demonstrate that nothing happens in a vacuum."

To my mind, she is talking here about the importance of the design aspect of the conference in being a critical factor in the ability to surface and work through the conference task.

Here is a quote from Trist & Emery articulating similar thoughts about participative design as early as 1973 in their book *Towards a Social Ecology – contextual appreciations of the future in the present*.

“To succeed in a problem-continuing environment post-industrial politics must become both more informed and more participative than the politics of industrialism, more devolved and open to more rapid and continuous feedback. Post-industrial man will spend more of his time in politics than industrial man and more in the planning processes associated with it. He may be presumed to have the leisure”.

I suppose this is what we offer in a GR conference; the ‘time out’ of the daily hamster-wheel or the ‘laboratory’ space to have the leisure to converse in a reflective way, to explore power dynamics and our political selves in a way that pays attention to the details of our engagement and involvement in a context that often feels luxurious and privileged.

The designer/s of a GRC need/s to think about the relationship between the structure of the events and their task, the size of groups and their functions, the location. This is a way of thinking we are used to in designing a GRC (time, task, territory). However, what is also called forth in the designer/s is their attention to movement, the flow from event to event; the space between, the pauses, the actions and the rhythmical relationship between them.

For example, Daniel Barenboim offered a series of talks in London some years ago where he discussed the process of creating music,

particularly through playing all of Beethoven's sonatas over a series of 12 meetings. In one of those talks he said that the pauses between the musical notes and the repetitions are just as important for the music as the notes themselves.

From Actor-network theory (Latour) we learn that the design can be thought of as an actor in its own right, in itself an active participant in what is being created, so that the aesthetic experience we are having and creating in the GR context is felt and understood as part of the dialectic between the design in its role as form and container and the members and staff in their roles as humans experiencing and making sense.

Hence, in Leicester 2011 the design has been loosened up to the limits of its necessary framework and members will be invited to a larger extent than ever, to create a conference structure to meet their needs and desires. So, for example, there will be no pre-conceived sub-conferences for less and more experienced GR members and if a group wishes to have that they will need to create it in negotiation with staff.

I am attempting a shift from seeing a conference design as only functional in the modern sense of the word (Chaplin- modern lives) to design as a key element of the art-at-work of the GR experience whose aesthetic expression is through its form.

I move now to the second element.

Attitude:

In that same paper on page 372, Rioch says:

“The deepest reason why we engage in this work and in similar pursuits is mystical and spiritual... Heaven forbid that we might have anything to do with anything that might be soft.. pleasant.. and yet, what on earth is our ‘systems theory’ all about, if not the merging of the one in the all?...”

(p. 372-3)

Rioch is expressing a spiritual aspect of GR which is often an idealisation, or at least this would be the psychoanalytic argument. However, I would argue that the sub text is a proposition about the aesthetics of GR.

Adorno, a German social theorist criticises both the idealist theory of art, which has enthralled art to absolute spirit and psychoanalytic theory of art which is individually based and hence sees all works of art as projections of the artist. For Freud, as well as for Kant, the work of art exists only in relation to the individual who contemplates or produces it. From a spiritual perspective, it is the other polarity- the artist or sometimes the artefact exists only as a vehicle to express God’s beauty.

In Group Relations we touch on the notion that the aesthetic experience of art comes about through the dialectic between the artists, their materials, and their audience- their groups, whether small or large. I will expand on the point when I discuss the third element-

experience – but for now I would like to remain with the Attitude and say a bit more about that.

Gaston Bachelard in his beautiful book 'The poetics of space' (1958) draws our attention to the compatibility of phenomenology and psychoanalysis. He says:

“ as a matter of fact, the image has to be understood phenomenologically in order to give it psychoanalytical efficacy. The phenomenologist, in this case, will accept the psychoanalyst's image in a spirit of shared trepidation. He will revive the primitivity and the specificity of the fears. In our civilisation, which has the same light everywhere, we no longer go to the cellar carrying a candle. But the unconscious cannot be civilised.”

As a Gestalt therapist the notions of encouraging the openness to what emerges, what is, and remaining curious without pre-judging fit very well here. Gestalt therapy is based in phenomenological philosophy and hence requires the therapist to suspend judgement and hold open their curiosity to the phenomenon in front of them as it unfolds in the here and now of the interaction. The working principles also require the gestalt therapist to bracket their beliefs and work with what is coined as a stance of 'creative indifference' which is not about being indifferent- that is, not caring what happens with the patient- but holding open the numerous possibilities for the patient's next steps without prioritising or preferring one to the other on their behalf, not even the patient's well being.

The GR consultants, as are the members, are invited to approach the GR experience with a 'spirit of inquiry' which is an attitude which both the phenomenologists and the analysts have in common, I think.

Bion expresses this attitude in *Attention and Interpretation* that "the 'act of faith' (*F*) depends on disciplined denial of memory and desire" (p. 41). For Bion, the act of faith is based on an acceptance of the unknown, since nobody knows what will happen, and it is essentially a spiritual approach to the self but from his point of view, the act of faith derives from a scientific state of mind, and should be freed from its usual religious connotations.

In that same book, he draws on letters of the poet Keats, who wrote about 'negative capability' which has since become such an influential idea in our work. Keats (1817, from 'letters to George and Thomas Keats):

" ... several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".

Bion quotes from Keats in order to reinforce his idea that the analyst is more able to analyse when he frees himself from the need to understand and make sense. He suggests that the more disciplined the analyst is to release himself from having any possession of

memory, desire, understanding or sense, the more possible it would become for him to work best with what the patient needs.

There is a particular leadership attitude which is embedded in these ideas which is about 'being artistically engaged' (Dewey p. 297) and participating in the social process of interaction in local situations in (the living present) the here-and-now without assuming a capacity to step out of, or beyond, or aside from, the interaction.

So, staffing a GR conference, and particularly directing one, would be participating in the art of creating without assuming a capacity to know more or beyond or outside of the human interaction, and with the capacity to endure uncertainty and doubt with a touch of humility as to one's individual capability. It means that the director and the staff are dependent upon the dialectic between the design principles which have shaped the conference framework or container and the conference members attitudes and behaviours with each other, with staff and with the design.

Dewey argues that art is 'ordinary experience expressed' (p. 298) which in the GR context is where design and attitude meet, to give rise to the third element in the work of art, and arguably art itself - experience.

Experience as Art

In talking about experience as art we need to ask ourselves (Dewey):

- how is it that the everyday making of things grows into that form of making which is genuinely artistic?

- How is it that our everyday enjoyment of scenes and situations develops into the peculiar satisfaction that attends the experience which is emphatically aesthetic?

In the coming together of different people into the GR space, there is a coming together of different and diverse cultures every time but there is also a recognisable pattern which emerges as similar every year and gives the GRC an air of 'déjà vu' or 'having been here before'; some experiences are experienced as a near repeat (the detachment of staff from the members, or the walk in the botanical gardens, the late nights in the bar or the 'them and us' of the large study group) and yet they are also always different.

Both these aspects; the sense of having been here before and at the same time being surprised by oneself or by others create the aesthetic dance of group relations, mostly expressed and communicated through the medium of conversation, or dialogue.

The art of dialogue

There is a significant body of literature on the development of theoretical and operational understandings of Dialogue in the social sciences, psychology and utilised in the fieldwork of anthropology. Dialogue has come to mean largely the system of identifying, sharing through speech those ideas and exploring the emotional dynamics operating at the same time as the "information" sharing.

Buber (Buber, 1932) spoke about dialogue as a method for connection, for contact. His theory of relationship requires both separation and connection, that is, it requires "between-ness". For

true connection to emerge, one has to be able to participate in the being of another; one cannot instrumentalise the other. The dialogue that Buber described is a transcendental process, when contacting is in the form of dialogue; the contacting process becomes itself an evolving, spiralling developmental process.

In other words, as the dialogical process unfolds, one must have faith in one's emerging solutions. There is surrender in the forming moment, rather than an attempt to control what would happen next. In the human interaction the trust in one's "emerging solutions" translates into trust in the "between". Genuine dialogue that leads to contact with another person involves entering into dialogue without controlling the other half of the dialogue (based on Buber and Jacobs, 1988).

Other writers on theory of Dialogue, for example Richard Hycner (1985) believes that the greatest therapeutic achievement when working in the therapeutic dyad is the restoration of full dialogue. This notion can be extended to groups as well, and you can see where I'm going- this takes us right back to Tolstoy's definition of art as the 'evocation of communication' and links us back to the experience often articulated in GR.

In a discussion describing inter/multi cultural dialogues, which is often the key dynamic of the here-and-now of a GR conference- Wheeler (2005) says that dialogue in this format means a particular kind of conversation in which the goal is not limited to expressing your perceptions or position, but rather focuses on clarifying the sources and meanings of the various points being expressed: not just what

you want or believe but also why that particular thing is important to you.

The intention that organises the activity and experience is not prevailing but deep understanding. Returning to spatial vocabulary, but still drawing on Gestalt theory, this means a shift in focus from the figure to the ground. Not your position itself, but where you are coming from, what the meaning of the figure is to you, in relation to your own ground of beliefs, values, goals, expectations and loyalties. This attitude for understanding dialogue is an expression of ethics in GR and contributes to the aesthetic experience which is GR.

The art of learning: experience and freedom

Theodor Adorno, a German social theorist (1903-69) considered capitalism to be seizing of freedom (p. 358) and art as a domain where freedom can be attained; it is of course a powerful idea that an experience of freedom expresses itself as aesthetic (*remind of Man on Wire*), with powerful socio-political implications, but I won't go into that here.

When I open the Leicester conference I always talk about the key concepts of the conference title, Authority – Role – Organisation and link them to freedom.

I always say about Authority that it is the embodied experience, which often is exciting and frightening at the same time, which sometimes can be a spiritual experience and which often is non-verbal or hard to articulate- the experience we have when we are able to make sense

of a role we have taken up or found ourselves in; when meaning emerges; when we have a sense that we are authors of our own actions.

I also like to differentiate authority from power. Whereas authority is an action taken up with integrity, through the understanding of the complexity of role and purpose; the use of power draws more directly on hierarchical or financial strength or weakness. I say to the conference membership and to the staff that in the conference, they will have opportunities to experience and experiment with the different ways each of us mobilize our power and authority. For example, how we take advantage or not of our heritage, our organizational position, our gender, our sexual orientation, familial roles, age, education, financial circumstances, political involvement, spiritual beliefs etc.

When I talk about role, I define this concept as the bringing together of authority and political relatedness of individuals to their groups, institutions and society. In the conference, I say, people have opportunities to explore the ways in which we take up our roles, the ongoing negotiation of giving and taking, the functionality of role, its destructive and creative capacity and the inter-dependent nature of role.

In defining organisations I say they are social constructs; and as such they carry different symbolic resonances for everyone within them. Individual experiences of organisations are shaped by the nature of the work, relationships between people and groups engaged in the work and by the nature of individual desires and emotions.

At Leicester and other organisational intervention I lead, I challenge and encourage people to think of themselves as Action Researchers curiously engaged in a process of finding out, making up and learning. I always want to problematise the meaning of 'experience' and of 'learning as progression'.

I come from an understanding of purpose as transformative- a tree is created and continuously re-creating itself for the purpose of being/ existing- no more or less than that. Dewey conceptualises experience in a very similar way:

experience has a developing movement toward its own consummation (Dewey, in *Art as Experience*, p.307).

He says:

“Every integral experience moves towards a closure, an ending, since it ceases only when the energies active in it have done their proper work. This closure of a circuit of energy is the opposite of arrest, of stasis. Maturation and fixation are polar opposites. Struggle and conflict may be themselves enjoyed, although they are painful, when they are experienced as means of developing an experience; members in that they carry it forward, not just because they are there”.

So in a method dedicated to the 'here and now' learning in the moment can be nothing but fresh and unique yet paradoxically familiar enough to be recognised as related to our base, our history, our context, our ground.

Also, I believe that learning itself is an art of finding and taking up authority. As action researchers, as agents of change and of learning, we know that learning is an experience of the body- i.e. a personal sense that we know through the boundaries of our skin but paradoxically, we cannot have this individual bodily experience without the Other or a group of Other. So we have freedom in the choices we make, but at the same time we are dependent upon our capacities to collaborate and have meaningful and real dialogue with other people and communities. In other words, learning is contingent upon our willingness to participate; again- to use the beautiful Dewey definition: 'to be artistically engaged'.

Concluding Remarks

So when Eric miller was busy with the human journey from dependency to autonomy, and Khaleelee has suggested more recently that perhaps we are busier with moving from autonomy to dependency I would say that the art of our work lies in the ongoing process of negotiating between the two, on the boundary of contact and our ethical practice; its beauty becomes known to us only when we keep our questions and negotiations alive, we do not collapse them into polarised positions, we do not elevate and idealise our work (of art) and do not encapsulate our ordinary experience so its only place is in the museum, and we vigorously search for uniqueness and freshness in our encounters.

I suggest that our work of art is our pursuit for social relevance and our quest for impact and applicability; and it is when we engage in our

pursuit passionately and thoughtfully we are evoking the aesthetic experience that we can then call Group Relations conference and method.

Thank you