

WHITE PAPER

CONSIDERATIONS FOR MANAGING SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN AKRI CONFERENCES

Introduction and Process Comments

The framework below is the culmination of many hours of discussion, reading and research by the AKRI Conference Committee. It was initially developed in response to the AKRI Board's request to address the complicated and nebulous issues surrounding the presence of "special relationships" in conference life. The issue of special relationships fits into the Committee's larger charge of developing a set of Ethical Principles for conducting conference work.

The Committee wishes to note that the timing and process by which this issue was brought to the forefront of our work suggests the possibility of a covert attack on the then-newly authorized National Conference Director and/or AKRI's partnership with Group Relations International for this conference. However, this issue has been around for decades, and the Committee agreed that creating some shared understandings of the complexities involved in ethical decision-making is important for AKRI leadership and the GR community in general.

To that end, we presented some suggested guidelines to the Board, and then to an invited group of mid to senior-level directors from varying ethnic / cultural backgrounds and a cross-section of GR training 'dynasties' to represent the breadth of views in the GR community. Following those conversations, we made some substantive revisions and presented the document again for feedback from the AKRI community at large at the membership meeting in March, 2025. Following this meeting we have again made changes and additions to the draft and now present it back to the Board. With the Board's approval this will serve as an AKRI-approved best practices document to be made available on the AKRI website and to interested stakeholders upon request.

We would like to acknowledge the work of Kat Zwick and Seth Harkins on "Basic Assumption Stranger" as one of the few serious and scholarly efforts to tackle the subject. Following their lead, we are using the term "special" instead of "dual" relationships, to better indicate the complexity of the possible intersections of our relatedness.

And finally, we gratefully acknowledge the work of our late colleague, Dr. Ellen Short, who made several material contributions to this framework, and was actively engaged in service to AKRI through her work with us right up to her untimely death. May her name be remembered for a Blessing.

Respectfully submitted by the AKRI Conference Committee:

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FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS IN CONFERENCE LIFE

1. We have identified six general subcategories of “special” relationships:

Professional	Sentient / Personal
Within membership	Within membership
Within staff	Within staff
Across staff-member boundary	Across staff-member boundary

2. **We have agreed on the following premises:**

- a. Special relationships are defined as pre-existing and/or ongoing substantive relationships between two parties outside of their respective roles within a conference (i.e. not just having met before but having some meaningful level of connection).
- b. Special relationships are ubiquitous in conference and GR organizational life, as they are in the “real world.”
- c. Because they are ubiquitous, within limits, the emphasis in conference work should be to ensure such connections are open to be studied as an integral part of conference life, when they are relevant to or influencing conference learning, rather than attempting to avoid them entirely. **Study requires more than just the willingness to name the relationships.**
- d. Special relationships across the staff member boundary have the most potential for exploitation, abuse, and/or role confusion, both during the conference and subsequently. Therefore, these relationships should be very carefully considered ahead of the conference by the director and involved parties before proceeding.

3. **Considerations for Managing Special Relationships in Conference Life**

Relationships with built-in power differentials and/or role conflicts with real-world consequences are the most potentially problematic. Several of the most common types of these relationships are outlined below, with attendant recommendations and a statement of responsibilities.

- **Licensed mental health practitioners** including psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, counselors, social workers, etc. must at all times be mindful of their ethical and licensing requirements regarding current or recent patients. Taking up a staff OR member role in a conference requires role shifts that can be--or become--incompatible with the requirement to act in the best interests of one’s patient. Therefore, attendance at a conference with a current or recent patient should generally be avoided. Coaches, consultants and other strongly client-

relational practitioners should also consider these issues in relation to their own professional codes of conduct.

- **Sexual conduct** between current staff and current members of a conference should be avoided at all times, regardless of preexisting special relationships. Sexual conduct between staff members with power differentials in role should also be avoided. Sexual conduct among peer staff requires willingness and ability to have the impact of that relationship on the conference available for study. Because these relationships are powerful drivers of group behavior, the ability to work—not just name—a special relationship of this kind is critical for ethical work. The projections and introjections inherent in conference life often persist well beyond the formal end of events, so the instigation of a new sexual relationship across the staff-member boundary, or among staff of differential power (e.g. Director, Team Leader, etc.) should be approached with conscientious attention to these dynamics, even well after a conference has ended.
- **Teachers, employers and supervisors** have special relationships that involve real-world power over the future or livelihood of their students and subordinates, and thus have high potential to lead to real-world harm to the lower status individual. The threat and/or fear of real-world consequences such as a failing grade, loss of position/promotion, etc. can negatively affect the ability of both parties to freely take up their conference roles and has high potential to create real-world harm to one or both attendees. This is particularly true for inexperienced conference attendees or staff, who may not realize the potential consequences of participating in this kind of experience with such a significant other. Attendance together as members, or across the staff-member boundary should therefore be carefully weighed against these risks, and pre-conference education for those less experienced with the stresses of conference life is strongly recommended.
- **Family and Romantic Attachments:** The wish to protect or preserve special sentient relationships is at great risk to take precedence over the learning goals of the individuals or of the conference system, both consciously and unconsciously. Family or romantic relationships that are transparent and available for study may stress the sentient relationships and/or the conference system in ways that (especially) inexperienced members and staff may be unprepared to work with. Family or current romantic relationships that are hidden may also tend to impact both the relationship and the conference system, but without the ability for the system learning to take place, which may result in conference casualties and/or damage to important real-world relationships. Attendance together as members, or across the staff-member boundary should therefore be carefully weighed against these risks, and pre-conference education for those less experienced with the stresses of conference life is strongly recommended. These same considerations apply to long-term friendships, mentoring relationships and other sentient ties that are an inevitable—and often cherished—outgrowth of working together repeatedly in the small world that is Group Relations.

- **Long-time friends and mentors, rivals and adversaries** also present challenges. While no formal role conflict may exist (at least in the present), we know that our long-standing sentient ties with others who support and practice Group Relations work can be quite meaningful and powerful drivers of our wishes, fantasies, fears and behaviors in conference life, as in real life. Sometimes these relationships are experienced in non-equivalent ways by the parties (that is one party feels more strongly about the relationship than the other) adding even more complexity. There is no feasible way to prevent this from ever occurring in conference life, nor would it necessarily serve the conference to attempt to do so, but the resulting dynamics can strongly impact a conference—and even derail it if they are enacted rather than being made available for study, thus allowing for rebalancing across the system.

4. Operational Considerations and Suggestions

- **Responsibility** for educating potential members and staff, and for managing the entry boundary effectively and ethically lies with those tasked with pre-conference outreach, education and enrollment, such as the Conference Director and Administrators. However, the entire GR community can and should take some care to consider such factors when recruiting or encouraging potential members or staff to participate in a particular event. Such steps may include statements in conference brochures, pre-conference communication and education, registration and refund policies that are sensitive to the issues, and so on.
- This is particularly complex when we consider that recruitment for conference members often involves explicit or implicit leveraging of personal and/or professional relationships with conference staff and organizational sponsors. Further, we often incentivize attendance by cohorts of students, organizational teams and other pre-existing groups of inter-related individuals. How we collectively balance the resulting realities of intersectionality among members and between members and staff, with attention to the potential for conscious or unconscious exploitation, thus becomes an inevitable issue for careful and conscientious thought by conference management and staff, as well as conference sponsors.
- Operationalizing such a balance will require more collective work by the GR community. For example, what does it really mean to “study” an ongoing special relationship in conference life, while remaining in the Here and Now? What does it mean to the individuals involved and to the system when a special relationship is desired or developed within a conference, and how is this navigated ethically by all those involved? What does it mean to consult ‘without memory or desire’ when one has strong ties to other staff or members? As we have noted already, all these issues occur frequently in the real world, and failure to study them thus reduces the value and relevance of GR work to real group life. But conversely, both the activities of those in special relationships and the action of attempting to study them can be used in the service of basic assumption life, and can undermine the group-as-a-whole focus that is a hallmark

of the Group Relations approach. How do we as a community balance these conflicting imperatives effectively and ethically?

We provide here some beginning thoughts on how to approach the issue, based on feedback from the various constituencies listed above as well as some experiences of the committee members in attempting to take up these challenges effectively from various conference roles.

1. Directors can and should ask questions of themselves and of all staff they hire that help to surface preexisting relationships as part of their hiring considerations.
2. Brochure language can make full mention of the importance of special relationships in conferences, and invite potential members to fully disclose any relationships they are aware of among members or staff as part of registration.
3. All staff can be made aware of registrant identities ahead of the conference in order to help identify existing relationships, and the conference directorate may then consider when / if further exploration is warranted with a recruit—or staff member before the conference begins.
4. As noted above, policies about deadlines, reimbursements for withdrawal, etc. should be sensitive to these nuances that may appear only as the conference is filling.
5. Once the conference has begun, the Director and Team Leaders can encourage working with special relationships in several ways:
 - a. They can model approaching the topic with one or more relationships they possess themselves, with particular attention to relationships where they are aware of feeling something significant (whether positive or negative, related to recent events or to past history)
 - b. They can request, expect, and make sufficient time in staff work to allow other staff to surface and work special relationships during preconference or in-conference meetings as appropriate.
 - c. Importantly, they can demonstrate and model how such information is relevant to the system-as-a-whole, e.g. in relation to the conference themes, to dynamics emerging among or within subgroups, etc.
 - d. This leads to another consideration; given the nature and relatively small size of the global community engaged in group relations work, it is probably impossible to surface every special relationship at every level of intensity present in a conference, and attempting to do so could easily take over all the time available in any given event. It is therefore incumbent on all staff, but especially staff leadership, to consider what the unconscious and systemic meaning may be for WHY a particular relationship does surface and/or get significant ‘airtime’, while recognizing that other relationships may remain more dormant or peripheral to the life of that particular system.

Closing thought: This paper represents a significant investment of time, thought and energy on the part of the people listed above and many others. However, this is only the beginning of an ongoing effort to become more mindful, thoughtful, and curious, as well as ethical, about the role special relationships have and will continue to play in conference life.