Learning from Experience: Formation for Ministry and Group Relations Programs

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Abstract: A major event in the field of experiential learning was the first “Leicester conference” in the UK conducted in 1957. The Conference was a two-week residential working Conference, focusing on such issues as authority, leadership and organisation. This Conference gave birth to what was to become the Group Relations Training Programme (GRTP) of the Tavistock Institute in London. This Paper presents an overview of the (GRTP) process and theory using a composite case study related to a Catholic Parish. It is suggested that GRTP processes offer a potentially useful instrument in the task of forming men and women as effective Ministers of the gospel.

Key Words: group relations; parish ministry; psycho-analysis; projective identification; basic assumption dependency; fight – flight; pairing

The Primary Task of this Paper is to present an overview of some aspects related to Group Relations processes. This method of experiential education offers a potentially powerful instrument in the formation of Christian Ministers. The Paper begins with a composite case study of an inner city Catholic Parish, which for the purpose of this Paper is called St Bede’s Southtown. The case study is presented to illustrate specific socio-psychological and organisational ideas that are to be explored in the Paper.

The scope of the Paper is limited to introducing foundational concepts related to Group Relations programs. The case study used to illustrate how group relations processes might assist good people with good intentions to make sense of systemic breakdown.

St. Bede’s Southtown

St Bede’s had a well-earned reputation of advocacy for social justice. Many of those who attended Sunday Eucharist at St Bede’s did not live in the Parish. Historically, the Parish was characterised by an intelligent, committed, prophetic Pastor. Due to ill health the Pastor gradually became less active in the Parish dying some years after he had ceased active ministry. Throughout the time of the Pastor’s illness the community life at St Bede’s was largely maintained by a small band of committed members with a series of “revolving Priests” presiding at the Parish Sunday Eucharist.

Through an agreement between the Bishop and a Religious congregation a new Parish Priest was eventually appointed. The relationship between the new Parish Priest and members of the St Bede’s community however quickly deteriorated to the point where, out of a concern for the psychological well-being of the Priest, the superiors of the Religious congregation renegotiated the arrangement with the Bishop, and ordered the Priest, under obedience, to leave the Parish. Around this time some members of the
community described themselves as belonging to Southtown Catholic Church as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church and they threatened to break from the diocese if their demand that the Bishop appoint a Priest “they approved of” was not met.

The Bishop quickly appointed a member of one of the new movements in the Catholic Church as the new Parish Priest. Other clergy belonging to the movement were also appointed to work in the Parish. The new Parish Priest and the movement to which he belongs had a markedly different vision of church, mission and community to that of the beloved, dead Pastor and many of those who gather for Sunday Mass. Over time tension between the Parish Priest and the community members grew in intensity and an incident involving the Police occurred. I want to suggest that insights gained through participation in Group Relations Training Programs have the potential to help make sense of this case of systemic breakdown.

**Group Relations Programs**

A Group Relations Program is an experiential education process which can be conducted over a couple of days, or more thoroughly, in a residential setting over the period of one or two weeks. The program involves the intensive study of authority, leadership and autonomy as individuals take part in a temporary institution.¹ The process involves members monitoring their own experience of participating in the group and institutional dynamics of the event. This form of experiential learning concentrates on interpreting the constantly shifting, dynamic unconscious processes which mediate the relations between the individual and the group in the ‘here and now.’²

The residential sustained version of this method of teaching/learning has the potential to provide a rich resource for learning on *how to think about* issues of leadership, role, authority and organisation.

Group Relations has been described as:

> a method of study and training in the way people perform their roles in the groups and systems to which they belong. These can be work groups, teams or organisations, or less formal social groups. A group may be said to be two or more people interacting to achieve a common task. The basis of group relations theory is that groups move in and out of focusing on their task and a number of different defensive positions based on unarticulated group phantasy.³

As described, Group Relations is a method of study in the way people perform their roles in groups and systems. Church by its very nature involves groups, systems, leaders, followers and varying levels of authority as two or more people gathered in the name of Jesus Christ interact to achieve the common task of giving witness to God acting in human history.

**What Happens in Group Relations Work?**

In group relations work learners are put in situations in which anxieties are quite deliberately evoked. The situations are designed to be safe and contained enough so that it is just possible for participants to see the anxieties in operation and to think about them. The role of staffs in such events are to aid participants in the discovery, study and

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transformation of unconscious group and systemic processes, which may, at times, take the form of poisonous projections and group madness. The staffs do this through interpretations designed to help the participants to understand the situation of being in the grip of “psychotic” anxieties. Staffs are able to do this through their training in working with projections and transferences. Group experiences are usually complemented with time for individual consultations in the context of a small group. In this process each member is invited to reflect upon what they have learnt through the various learning events and its relevance to their work and life.

Among a range of other influences the work of two British Psychoanalysts, Melanie Klein and Wilfred Bion, has been very influential in the development of Group Relations Programs.

Klein was an analyst who specialized in working with children. Initially grounded in Freudian theory, Klein developed her own contribution to psychoanalytic theory and practice.

For Klein, development during the very earliest months and years of life after birth significantly influences the structure of the personality that will endure throughout life. According to Klein, early development is comprised of two distinct but overlapping positions: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. In the paranoid-schizoid position the ego is split and unacceptable parts of the ego are evacuated from the ego and projected onto or into an object in the environment.

The relationship between members of the community and the current parish priest at St Bede’s can be seen as an example of the paranoid-schizoid position in action. I would like to suggest that through a Kleinian lens the priest can be seen to metaphorically, serve as a screen. Parts of the community members’ psyches, the parts which they find unacceptable to themselves, are projected onto the screen-parish priest. For example any underlying tendency that a community member might have towards dictatorial leadership, perhaps consciously, stridently denied, in normal circumstances is securely relegated to the unconscious. When the individual experiences subjective stress arising from a perceived threat associated with change these dormant unconscious tendencies may be disturbed. Under stress, the individual is also unable to contain the emotions associated with this underlying tendency. In order to cope with what is experienced as a subjectively intolerable situation, the thought patterns and emotions associated with dictatorial leadership are evacuated out of the self, and projected onto the other, in this case, the parish priest. The parish priest is then seen, not as a person, but simply as a dictatorial doctrinaire figure that represents a movement and perhaps a whole worldview. Because the community member has denied that he or she has any dictatorial tendencies he or she cannot identify, at any level, with the parish priest in this regard. [He is not like I am and I fear him] A consequence of this dynamic can be that the parish priest not only appears to be dictatorial and doctrinaire but also somewhat alien. This parish priest is now a figure that the community member could have nothing in common with.

In Klein’s depressive position, or state of readiness, a person is able to contain both “acceptable” and “unacceptable” parts of the self and is able to think about them as parts of a whole self. Developing this line of thought theologically, this idea promotes a view of a whole person as one who recognises that he or she is radically not whole. We might

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4 Robert M Young, Mental Space and Group Relations; http://human-nature.com/group/chap1.html; accessed 30 August 2006.

5 See Mental Space and Group Relations; http://human-nature.com/group/chap1.html; accessed 30 August 2006
identify this with what Sebastian Moore describes as a “wobble” at the heart of an individual’s being. A wobble that is psychologically prior to sinfulness which Moore names as Original Sin. A person operating in the depressive position also accepts that he or she is in need of ongoing conversion, growth and healing. This recognition by the individual of their need for growth, forgiveness and healing is an instance of individual conversion. This conversion manifests as a reorientation away from a primary concern with self to a re-centring of one’s desire towards the ultimate source of love. Such a view of wholeness is in stark contrast to the popular vision of wholeness which is variously portrayed as self actualization, balance, being at one with the universe or being in a state where one feels totally in charge and in control of one’s environment.

In Klein’s view the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions are not simply transitory or passing phases or stages; they set up the basis of the psyche’s enduring orientation throughout life. Depending on the level of integration and the amount of subjective stress, elements of oscillation between the two positions is a phenomenon that can be observed. The potential for oscillation is often actualized when a person is in a state of heightened anxiety and subjective stress. Such a state may be evoked in a Group Relations program because the group phenomena examined activates primitive and primary emotional experiences.

**Projective Identification**

Building on the idea of splitting and projection Klein articulated the concept of projective identification. Klein observed that when split-off parts of the ego are projected onto another person, the recipient of the projection, to varying degrees, takes in the evacuated, split-off, parts and experiences them as if they were part of him or her. In terms of the case study we examine an episode in which the first priest appointed St Bede’s was chased down the main street of Southtown in full liturgical attire. Later this priest reported that while he was not afraid for his physical safety, he was none-the-less afraid. I want to suggest that this priest had taken-in and internalized the fear and anxiety that had been projected onto him, by community members, in the context of a liturgical celebration. I suggest that throughout the liturgy the priest was made to feel as if he was intruding on sacred ground. Community members did not really know this priest as a person, he had not been in the parish long enough for real relationships to develop. The intense projections of anxiety and fear, combined with the priest’s predisposition with regard to taking-in these projections, meant that his sensitive psyche was flooded. His only realistic option, with regard to personal survival, was to run away as quickly as he could from the source of the projected fear and anxiety. Through projective identification this priest felt fearful and anxious. He had internalized the anxiety and fear that the community members could not contain, and subsequently projected onto him.

Klein’s theory implies that through the dynamic of projective identification we actually unconsciously affect each other’s emotions and behaviours. This dynamic can have profound implications when two or more gather. If those who are the focus of such gatherings or have a leadership role in such a community are to retain personal psychic health and develop life giving communities it is vital that they become aware of the

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potentially destructive projections that might be dumped onto them and how these projections might affect them.

Building on Klein’s work Wilfred Bion discovered that when people gather in groups the process of mutual influence through splitting and subsequent projective identification gave rise to some specific group and organisational manifestations. The basic tension between reality and phantasy experienced in the individual produces a particular set of manifestations when two or more people gather to do a task together. Bion observed that whilst groups stated that they were intent on performing a primary task, in fact the group often acted in ways that were inconsistent with completing this task.

Bion distinguished two main tendencies in the life of a group: the tendency towards work on the primary task or *work-group mentality*, and a second, often unconscious, tendency to avoid work on the primary task, which he termed *basic assumption mentality*. These opposing tendencies can be thought of as the wish to face and work with reality, and the wish to evade it when it is painful or causes psychological conflict within, or between group members.

In *work-group mentality*, members are intent on carrying out a specifiable task and want to assess their effectiveness in doing it. By contrast, in *basic assumption mentality*, the group’s behaviour is directed at attempting to meet the unconscious needs of its members by reducing anxiety and internal conflicts. According to Bion, much of the irrational and apparently chaotic behaviour we see in groups can be viewed as springing from *basic assumptions* common to all their members.

The behaviour at St Bede’s Southtown can be described as chaotic. I believe that Bion’s scheme provides a useful tool to assist in understanding what was (is) going on in this Christian community.

Bion distinguished three basic assumptions, each giving rise to a particular complex of feelings, thoughts and behaviour, *basic assumption dependency*, *basic assumption fight-flight* and *basic assumption pairing*. Although a group or organisation may be generally characterised by either a Work-Group mentality or one of the three basic assumption mentalities, groups and organisations often dance between *work-group mentality* and one or other of the three *basic assumptions* groups in turn.

Each of the three *basic assumption* groups or mentalities is now presented, in turn, illustrated with examples of behaviour at St Bede’s.

**Basic Assumption Dependency**

A group dominated by basic assumption dependency behaves as if its primary task is solely to provide for the satisfaction of the needs and wishes of its members. The leader is expected to look after, protect and sustain the members of the group, to make them feel good, and not to face them with the demands of the group’s real purpose. The leader serves as a focus for a pathological form of dependency which inhibits growth and development. Any attempts to change the organization are resisted, since this induces a fear of being uncared for. The leader may be absent or even dead, provided the illusion that he or she contains the solution can be sustained. Debates within the

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9 Stokes “Unconscious at Work,” 20-22.
10 Stokes “Unconscious at Work,” 20-22.
organization may then be not so much about how to tackle present difficulties as about what the absent leader would have said or thought.\textsuperscript{11}

Basic assumption dependence is a strong characteristic of the community at St Bede’s with the memory of the beloved dead priest and what he would do if he was here now as dominant characteristic of the community.

The episode, described above, of the parish priest being chased down the main street of Southtown in full liturgical attire was a dramatic demonstration of the results of basic assumption dependency in action. This priest was not the beloved pastor. From the point of view of the community, acting out of basic assumption dependency, it would not have mattered who the priest was, he was not the beloved pastor and he could not take over the role of the absent (dead) leader. Another example to illustrate basic assumption dependency at St Bede’s concerns again, the first appointed parish priest. He reported that he wanted to continue the vision of preferential concern for the local indigenous population, but he wanted to do things in a different way to the beloved dead pastor. His desire was to repair a derelict property and make accommodation available for students and volunteers. This model is successfully used in another inner city parish. The latter days of this priest’s short tenure included community members changing the locks to the church doors overnight. The change in personnel with regard to a new parish priest and the proposed changes to property were dramatically resisted by community members.

**Basic Assumption Fight-Flight**

The assumption here is that there is a danger or ‘enemy’, which should either be attacked or fled from. However, as Bion puts it, the group is prepared to do either indifferently. Members look to the leader to devise some appropriate action; their task is merely to follow.\textsuperscript{12}

Amongst the community at St Bede’s the enemy is variously portrayed as the bishop, the parish priest, the movement to which the priest belongs and the Pope.

According to this theory the sense of common enemy provides a spurious sense of togetherness, while also serving to avoid facing the difficulties of the work itself. Alternatively, such a group may spend its time protesting angrily, without actually planning any specific action to deal with the perceived threat.\textsuperscript{13}

Some members of the St Bede’s community have created a web based bulletin board in which individuals share the latest parish “news” with all who are interested. This bulletin board is not *per se* a parish communication tool. It is an underground, somewhat subversive facility. The bulletin board provides a sense of virtual community as all those who are engaged in it share a common enemy or enemies. This group protests angrily to anyone who is willing to listen, without any specific action to deal with the perceived threat of change.

**Basic Assumption Pairing**

This basic assumption is based on the collective and unconscious belief that, whatever the actual problems and needs of the group, a future event will solve them. The group behaves as if pairing or coupling between two members within the group, or perhaps between the leader of the group and some external person, will bring about salvation.

\textsuperscript{11} Stokes “Unconscious at Work,” 20-22.

\textsuperscript{12} Stokes “Unconscious at Work,” 20-22.

\textsuperscript{13} Stokes “Unconscious at Work,” 20-22.
The group is focused entirely on the future, but as a defence against the difficulties of the present ..The group is in fact not interested in working practically towards this future, but only in sustaining a vague sense of hope as a way out of its current difficulties.  

From observation, there are two examples of basic assumption pairing in action, at St Bede’s. The first relates to a meeting between a person from the St Bede’s community, who was closely associated with the former pastor, and senior administrator of the diocese. Members of the community viewed this meeting as the answer to their prayers, as they imagined that working together these two people could solve the problem. The phantasy was based on the belief that the administrator not only could, but after hearing the story from the point of view of the community, would simply remove the Parish Priest and replace him with a more suitable Priest.  

The primary task of this Paper has been to present a brief overview of some aspects related to Group Relations processes and their potential applicability to the task of forming men and women as effective Ministers of the gospel. Group Relations Australia is the major organisation in Oceania working in the area of group relations, its website is www.grouprelations.org.au.

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