

Race, Culture and Containment in the Formal and Informal Systems of Group Relations Conferences

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses experiences, observations, and hypotheses about the function of the informal system and its relationship to the formal system within a conference and/or experiential structure. For the purposes of this paper, formal systems are defined as systems that comprise conference or conference-like structures, and informal systems will be defined as group and paired activities occurring both inside and outside the boundaries of the temporary institution. Exploration of the relational aspects of both systems will be linked to basic assumption theory; specifically, focusing on the informal system's connection to basic assumption functioning, as well as the question of whether or not what occurs within the informal system can be defined as work. As a researcher, I am interested in how aspects of race, gender, and cultural diversity impact group dynamics, and exploration of these variables will be the focus of the presentation and analyses of three vignettes. Another question to be explored is: what is the significance of the informal system to the conference and/or temporary institution as a whole? It would seem that although much of what occurs within the informal system holds an important place in the conference as a whole, activities occurring in this sphere are, like basic assumption group functioning, generally not regarded as work in conference and other organizational structures. Moreover, informal system activities are often ambivalently held and/or withheld across the boundaries between conference members and staff, or employers and employees. Some of the consequences of maintaining the split between the formal and informal systems will also be explored in this paper, through the presentation of the three vignettes. Much of the material presented will come from my experience in group relations conferences in the USA and the UK, in both the staff consultant and member roles. This paper draws on applications of psychoanalysis, specifically focusing on Bion (1975), and Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996).

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INTRODUCTION

This paper was written, initially, as a way to process my experiences as a member of a conference that was held in the UK. After this conference, in the midst of several weeks of post-conference communications, I observed that my colleagues and I were very caught up with reviewing events that had occurred not during the group sessions (e.g., the formal conference system), but primarily with events and activities that had occurred before, between, and after formal group events, and collectively comprise the informal conference system.

During this time, it seemed to me that my focus on what had happened in the informal conference system might be indicative of the emphasis that I had placed upon resisting joining the conference as a whole. On one hand, it was possible that my resistance had been a classic case of defence against dependency upon the group, via the stress I might have felt about truly immersing myself in the group in the face of possible annihilation. Based on my own experiences and learning, I identified this as the essence of basic assumption behaviour, which was essentially what I had been taught in graduate school about the nature of the struggle between the individual and the group. My resistance may also have been indicative of: (1) difficulties in managing the boundary between my former conference staff roles and a return to the member role; (2) concern about being one of only two African Americans at the conference; (3) anxiety about being a member of a conference outside of the USA. Whatever the reasons, I felt that I had failed in my member role by not having given myself over, fully, to the experience of the conference.

With all of this in mind, I found myself thinking a great deal about group relations conference work, specifically focusing on the relationship between the formal and informal conference systems, and began writing about this dynamic in my journal as a way of processing my thoughts. What was originally journaling morphed into several presentations at two scientific meetings and now this paper.

In exploring the temporary institution of the conference and/or experiential system as two distinct, dichotomized entities, I may be emphasizing a split that is not so clearly defined, but my purpose in doing that is to highlight the following: (1) that much of what occurs in the informal conference system is ambivalently held by staff and members; (2) that ambivalence can result in detachment from the

group; (3) that the act of detachment, particularly when connected to cultural dynamics, is not pathological, but may be adaptive and related to survival of the psyche; (4) that fears of annihilation related to merging with the group can embody a cultural context, as well as a theoretical one. Ambivalence can also result in the withholding of information about occurrences in the informal system from the conference as a whole. Withholding information often results in a void in the process of learning and symbiotic joining for both members and staff. Additionally, information that is consciously withheld is often unconsciously acted out by members and staff in ways that may also impede learning.

This paper will include a brief outline and application of basic assumption theory. Two vignettes, based upon my observations in group relations conferences, and one from my experience as a teaching assistant/group facilitator in a graduate level group dynamics course, will be presented to provide a format upon which to apply the theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Basic assumption (ba) functioning is usually discussed in relation only to the formal conference system, particularly in the way it can impede work in small, large, institutional, and intergroup events. However, in viewing the conference as a temporary institution, the application of ba theory to the informal conference system is appropriate because I believe that much of the ba behaviour that begins in the formal system continues to be expressed, explored, and acted out in the informal conference system.

The formal conference system, according to the Tavistock group relations model, consists of small, large, institutional and intergroup events, plenaries, and role and review sessions. In some group dynamics courses that are taught at the graduate level, both a didactic and an experiential component is included that is similar in composition to the small group construction at conferences. In the classroom, the experiential component often consists of two small groups occurring in a fishbowl configuration, facilitated by the professor and/or designated teaching assistants.

The informal conference system generally consists of activities outside of the formal system in which conscious and unconscious processes that become activated in the formal conference system continued to be explored. For example, alliances that may consist of pairings, triangularized relationships, and larger group formations often occur. Attractions of an emotional, intellectual, and sexual nature are often discussed and explored. Sexual attractions are also

occasionally acted on by members and staff. Disagreements, quarrels, and other expressions of dislike, disdain, etc., often occur between conference participants. Alliances between members and staff, which often go unacknowledged at formal conference events, are often discussed during informal conference time. Members discuss the qualifications and relative competence and/or incompetence of staff members informally; staff discussions are often held in the same vein about certain conference members. Issues of cultural diversity – e.g., race, gender, age, and sexual orientation are also more openly discussed and explored within the informal conference system. To all of these activities, there is a quality of the ‘as if’, specifically, members and staff behave *as if* these issues can only be explored outside of the formal conference, and that they can be shared, and explored, within the informal system; e.g., *as if* withholding these dynamics from the formal conference environment is essential to the conference’s survival. Similar dynamics occur within an academic setting in which experiential group learning is facilitated; these dynamics may feel more intense, due to the evaluative nature of the learning environment, as well as the embedded and hierarchical relationships between students, faculty, programme, department, and the academic institution as a whole.

Bion’s (1975) theory of basic assumption group functioning is viewed in sharp contrast to optimal work group functioning, in which a group is focused only on the primary task. In work groups, although individuals usually have hidden agendas or motivations, the level of functioning is one in which ‘members consciously pursue an agreed upon objective and deliberately engage in the completion of a work task’ (Hayden and Molenkamp, 2004, p. 141). Basic assumption functioning was initially described by Bion as comprising three types: (1) basic assumption dependency (baD), a feeling of group dependency upon the leadership in order to derive knowledge and/or power; (2) basic assumption fight/flight (baF/F), characterized by a group’s need to run away from authority or destroy it; and (3) basic assumption pairing (baP), a symbolic pairing based upon group desire for reproduction between two individuals, regardless of gender, that will produce, in fantasy, a saviour or messiah (Rioch, 1975; Lawrence et al., 1996). Turquet (1974) (as cited in Lawrence et al., 1996) added basic assumption oneness (baO), characterized as a defence against differentiation and expressed by passive participation and fusion with an omnipotent source of power. The most recent addition is the work of Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996) on what they identify as ‘the fifth basic assumption’, basic assumption Me-ness (baM), defined as the opposite of baO, and characterized by

a type of withdrawal from, and denial of, the group via a focus on the self (p. 143). Thus, in baM, individuals experience a fear of engulfment by the group, and behave in ways that deny the reality of the group (Hayden and Molenkamp, 2004).

In applying basic assumption theory to what occurs in the informal group relations conference system, I believe the one that most closely aligns with this phenomena is basic assumption Me-ness (baM), which Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996) describe as representing:

... a culture of selfishness in which individuals appear to be only conscious of their own personal boundaries, which they believe have to be protected from any incursion by others Any social configuration such as the group, society, thus comes to represent the damaged and damaging object. The group is construed as an antagonistic object because it is deemed to be phobic. Consequently, the 'me' who feels impotent and vulnerable, with real anxieties about obliteration, takes up a counter-dependent position to the group which is succeeded by a denial of its very existence; only 'me' has reality. This seems to be the essence of the baM. (pp. 36, 45)

Thus, immersion in baM is compatible, at group and societal levels, with detachment from the group and may have its foundation in narcissistic and/or cultural ideology. It is important to note that the authors emphasize that baM may be 'a result of the historical processes of working conferences', which have been conducted for fifty years, and although members attend conferences to learn about group functioning and 'attain W behaviour as quickly and effortlessly as possible', they experience strong desires to both know and to not know, which can lead to the emergence of baM as an expression of resistance to 'ba and W behaviour' (p. 37). It would seem likely, therefore, that activities that occur outside of the formal conference system (e.g., within the informal system), that are withheld and ultimately split off, could represent an expression of the members' (and staff's) desire to simultaneously know and not know, as well as a resistance to W and other ba behavior.

Lawrence, Bain and Gould (1996) refer to culture as being national and/or industrialized, and focus specifically on issues of stress related to baM caused by phenomena such as economic recessions, unemployment, and homelessness. Although multiple definitions of culture exist, I define it differently, using a definition from Goldberger and Veroff (1995), who define culture as a set of common experiences related to a variety of variables: geographical boundaries, language, race, ethnicity, religious belief, social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability. Thus, I believe that the *culture of selfishness* referred to by Lawrence, Bain and Gould can also be

representative of a *culture of struggle* – the struggle of managing the personal boundaries related to the race, gender, sexual orientation, age, role, and valence (e.g., a predisposition to take up certain roles in groups, often in relation to basic assumption functioning) (Hayden and Molenkamp, 2004), of the individual in the face of what can become a very seductive pull to merge with the group. For example, an individual of colour who finds her or himself becoming the object of stereotyped projections about their race, may definitely view the group (and society) as a ‘damaged and/or damaging object’ and choose, therefore, to take up a ‘counter-dependent position in the group’ via denial of the group’s existence (Lawrence et al., p. 45). The authors provide an example of what they identify as the more sophisticated uses of baM in service of the work group:

There is a sense in which baM can be viewed as a dependency on oneself and one’s own resources in order to have a basis of dependability to participate in and hearken to the realities of the environment. It can be a necessary withdrawal into the self to be able to make oneself available for thoughts and thinking and to be able to be attentive to external reality. BaM can become an introspective activity which, for example, is difficult to achieve in a baF/F culture. (p. 50)

Thus, the act of detachment from the group is not only *not* pathological, but may be adaptive, characterized as an act of dependency upon oneself, and related to issues of survival of the psyche. The fear of annihilation concerning merging with the group could embody a cultural context as well as a theoretical one.

The following vignettes contain examples of consultant and member behaviour during both formal and informal conference and/or experiential group events. Evidence of ba and, specifically, baM functioning is presented as the foundation of the informal conference system. Analyses of the vignettes will also explore whether such functioning can be defined as work, and the consequences of maintaining the split between the formal and informal systems of the temporary institution as a whole.

VIGNETTE ONE

At a Masters’ level group dynamics course that was held at New York University, the consultant staff consisted of two teaching assistants and the professor. The TAs were both female, one a White Jewish woman, and one an African American woman (myself), and the professor was also an African American woman. The course lasted for three hours and was structured so that one hour was devoted to a lecture on group dynamics by the professor, who then exited the class

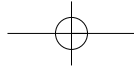
and turned the students over to the authority of the TAs. They facilitated two groups; Group A and Group B, in a fishbowl configuration (e.g., Group B observed group A's small group session for forty-five minutes, and Group A observed Group B's small group session for forty-five minutes). The lectures focused on the application of group relations theory to race, gender, sexual orientation, and current world events, all of which served to stimulate lively discussions among the students. At the start of the course the TAs noticed that the departure of the professor was usually met with both dismay and longing for the now absent leader, as well as some degree of anxiety about being 'handed over' to the TAs. During the course of the small group sessions we noticed that members of both small groups had difficulty engaging with each other, or engaged on only a superficial level. Initially, we assumed that, because most of the students were known to each other through their experiences of having taken a number of Masters' level courses together, prior knowledge of each other was impeding their willingness to engage as a group owing to fears of damaging personal alliances. Gradually, we became aware of sub-groups that were forming outside of the formal class environment. We were also aware that what was occurring in the sub-groups in the informal setting was not being discussed in the classroom. Moreover, our attempts to encourage each group to engage were met with intense resistance. At first the TAs (and the professor) interpreted the resistance as *baF/F* and attempted to feed the students (Lawrence et al., 1996), endeavouring to engage them with intervention after intervention. This feeding behaviour resulted in our becoming increasingly more frustrated at our inability to make contact with the group members. Moreover, the feelings of frustration and isolation in our pair led to competitive and conflicting behaviour with each other in our facilitator roles. For example, my colleague experienced feelings of sadness and hesitancy, and a maternal need to protect the students (who were mostly White), and I experienced feelings of impatience, anger, and a need to push and prod the students to behave more productively in their member roles. In consultation with the professor, we interpreted this competitiveness in part as containment of the students' projections around our pairing as an interracial same-sex pair, as well as their projections and fantasies about our relationship to each other and to the professor (e.g., the fantasy that I, as an African American woman was closer in colour, and, therefore, in relationship, to the African American female professor and, thus, a convenient container for the students' feelings of longing, anger, and frustration). In reality, however, it was my colleague who had the closer professional relationship to the professor.

Thus, it seemed that attachment and connectedness across racial boundaries in this experiential setting were deemed taboo.

A requirement of the course was that students write papers about their reaction to the experiential portion of the class, and it was in reading these papers that the faculty discovered that the students had withheld information concerning a homosexual romantic/sexual relationship of long standing between two of their White, gay, male classmates that had ended badly (before the class began), the after-effects of which had seemingly dominated the entire Masters' level cohort for that semester. In their papers, some of the students noted their feelings of anxiety about maintaining this secret, others wrote about their desire to talk about the classmates' relationship during group sessions, attributing their failure to do so to anxieties about being viewed as homophobic, and/or being viewed as having betrayed the two males in question. Because this information was revealed only at the end of the semester, it was impossible for faculty to discuss it with the entire class, but the dynamic was eventually explored outside of class with the two males by the professor.

The students' focus on the two male ex-partners was indicative of baP; an unconscious desire for a symbolic pairing that would lead to the production of a new leader figure (e.g., a messiah and/or saviour) who would create a utopia that would save the group (Lawrence et al., 1996). However, the fact that the two males were no longer partnered was unconsciously denied (via the emergence of baP) and remained unspoken and unexplored by both groups. Thus, in reality, nothing could be created.

It is possible that baM functioning existed in this scenario, embodying a culture of selfishness based on the two ex-partners' attempts to withhold the information from the faculty, as well as the collusion of the other students to contain their secret. Alternatively, the ex-partners' act of withholding may have been representative of a culture of struggle related to the management of personal boundaries of gender and sexual orientation. The act of collusion by the students who knew of the relationship was underscored by the fact that many of them chose to reveal the 'secret' only in their end-of-semester papers – e.g., in a way that was safer, more controlled, and, ultimately, not in the less safe environment of the 'here and now' group event. The act of withholding, in addition to being indicative of baF/F, felt hostile to us as faculty, and was interpreted as an attack on the faculty's authority. The students' fears of annihilation related to merging with the group-embodied anxiety about a cultural dynamic of a same-sex pairing. Thus, anxiety, fears, and fantasies related to this pairing were used as a defence against the authority of faculty, the model, and experiential learning.

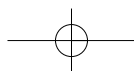


The informal system in this scenario was the repository of dynamics that served to maintain a split between the formal and informal settings. I believe that faculty and students colluded to maintain the split, symbolized by the students' act of withholding important information that was related to a same-sex pairing, which also paralleled the faculty's structure. Additionally, issues of racial and gendered dynamics concerning authority and leadership were also an integral part of the dynamics that occurred in this environment.

VIGNETTE TWO

As a member of consultant staff at a group relations conference in Scotland, I experienced a dynamic in which we as staff avoided symbiotic joining as a group. This was, ostensibly, in order to manage and suppress negative feelings caused by infighting and chaos within the conference's sponsoring institution, but also in order to protect ourselves from consciously experiencing (and acting upon) feelings of conflict and anger towards each other during the conference. Additionally, immediately prior to the start of the conference, the male director became ill and was replaced by a female member of the consultant staff. Thus, there was also staff anxiety about managing feelings of the loss of their original, authorized leader and working with the newly designated director who, although less experienced, had been authorized to assume a leadership role. A parallel process was in place regarding my hiring; another, more senior African American woman had originally been hired as consultant staff by the original director. She was unable to fulfil her duties and was asked by the original director to recommend alternative, competent Black females for the consultant role; she did so, and I was chosen to take her place on staff.

Prior to the conference, the staff expressed its anxiety about the loss of the original director and, at times, the loss of the original African American female consultant, as well as other areas of difficulty related primarily to disagreements among members of the sponsoring institution. It is my belief that to manage these complex feelings during the conference, we began to engage in what I felt to be detaching behaviour that was characterized by: (1) over-immersion in the tasks of conducting the conference; (2) projecting our feelings of anxiety on to the membership – particularly those members with whom some staff had institutional relationships (e.g., talking/worrying excessively about these members); (3) selectively withholding information about relationships with members across the boundary (e.g., a consultant neglected to inform staff that one of the members



was his patient). Another manifestation of the staff's desire to detach was characterized by our behaviour of drinking copious amounts of alcohol in the evenings during informal conference time. I understood this to be a culturally sanctioned method of joining. However, I eventually found that the overall effect of alcohol consumption by the staff resulted in effectively blunting any existing sharp edges that might have penetrated the superficial cover of camaraderie, thus effectively adding to the feeling of detachment. As the only American and the only African American in the conference, there were times when I felt objectified and exoticized; an object at which my colleagues and the membership could direct their projections. Alternatively, I engaged in my own projective processes of objectification with my colleagues and the membership concerning their foreignness to me. Overall, I found that the continuum of cultural difference and outsider status offered a convenient container for all manner of projective material to be deposited, which often resulted in a continuation of the process of detachment among the staff, the membership, and, ultimately, the conference as a whole.

In this vignette, it is clear that cultural differences in processing, analysing, and experiencing staff work may have been at play; my perception and subsequent evaluation of 'detached behaviour' among the staff was clearly related to my own cultural affiliations, biases, and projective processes. Maintenance of my outsider status (e.g., dependence upon myself) (Lawrence et al., 1996), felt safer than attempting to merge with the staff group. Thus, in the face of fears of annihilation, cultural context, and, specifically, cultural difference, formed the foundation of my detachment.

During the course of this conference, a member experienced several episodes of what appeared to be extreme emotional disturbance. I took this to be indicative of the staff's inability to effectively manage, explore, and thus contain our complex relationships with each other in both the formal and informal conference systems. It seems that, despite the fact that we were designated to be a staff group, our unconscious assumptions were that we were, in effect, a leaderless non-group (Lawrence et al., 1996). Ultimately, I believe that we, as staff, allowed our preoccupation with remaining detached and avoiding symbiotic joining as a group to impede the potential for learning and effective leadership functioning. In doing so, we engaged in what Kahn and Green (2004) refer to as the seduction and betrayal dynamic by allowing the subordinate group members to carry and act out the pain that was hidden in the authority group. Kahn and Green describe one of the effects of this dynamic:

Subordinate pain. The hallmark of the seduction and betrayal dynamic is that subordinate group members carry and act out pain that remains hidden within the authority group. . . . Subordinates may be rendered ill (physically or emotionally) by the experience of carrying the denied aspects of authority group members; they may internalize the projections of others about their sickness and act accordingly, just as children do in the face of parental abuse. (Hirschorn, 1988 and Miller, 1990 (as cited in Kahn & Green, 2004), p. 176)

Thus, the member's disturbing behaviour may have been an act of internalizing the denied, split off parts of the staff's feelings related to the loss of its original director and a consultant, as well as unprocessed and unacknowledged feelings of conflict, resentment, envy, and competition related to succession. Moreover, it seems that a baM culture of selfishness and struggle existed among the staff in managing our personal and institutional boundaries with each other and with the membership.

VIGNETTE THREE

This final vignette comprises several components of my experience as a member of a conference in the UK.

As mentioned in the introduction, one aspect of my experience was that of witnessing and participating in phenomena of withholding the self from full participation in the conference as a whole. This withholding behaviour was accomplished, primarily, by immersion in multiple pairings that resulted, ultimately, in my inability to focus on the conference. My alliances with others, although fulfilling emotionally, often conflicted with my membership role. Thus, like the students whose groups my colleague and I facilitated in Vignette 1, I, too, became immersed in holding on to the secret, confidential information of others, and, eventually, I came to hold that same expectation of others in relation to my own secrets. The act of holding secrets, which in reality were merely opportunities for learning, did, therefore, necessitate an element of detachment from group process; an avoidance from fully joining the group. For example, I witnessed a participant struggle with whether or not to openly acknowledge a professional and personal relationship with a staff member. Adding to the member's struggle was the fact that the member and the consultant continued to communicate with each other via text e-mails, across the member-staff boundary, during the conference. Additionally, racial and gender differences between this member and the consultant added to the member's fear of feeling unsafe at the prospect of revealing the relationship to the conference membership as a whole.

I also experienced a struggle concerning withholding information about my professional relationship with another staff member, the only other African American woman at the conference. Prior to this conference, this colleague and I had worked together on staff as consultants at a conference in the USA, and we had struggled, on behalf of the conference as a whole, with issues of ambition, competition, and envy in our staff roles. At one point, my colleague expressed anxiety about my being a member at the forthcoming UK conference, due to her fear that I would ultimately 'take her staff role away from her'. Thus, I began my experience at the UK conference feeling somewhat ill at ease as a member, unsure of how to process my feelings without making explicit references to my colleague, who was now a member of the conference staff.

In hindsight, I believe this issue of relationships across the boundary should have been spoken about by both myself and my colleagues during the formal conference for a variety of reasons; it could have provided an excellent opportunity for learning – specifically about how women of colour manage issues of competition, envy, mentoring, and succession as staff and as members in conferences and organizations. There was also something to be learned about the difficulty in transitioning from a staff role to a member role at a conference. During the conference all of this was clear to me, but it seemed too dangerous to openly explore and test the boundaries concerning authority by revealing these relationships within the formal system.

Thus, what was lost was the possibility for collective learning within the temporary institution, for example, about the existence of member and staff relationships across the boundary, which was in turn connected to issues of access to power, authority, and privilege in a context of mentoring and succession (which was a major theme among staff at this conference). Additionally, the staff's inability to openly express and work with their own struggles in this regard served to perpetuate our feelings of a lack of safety. The baM culture of this temporary institution, therefore, was characterized by an unconscious dictum that learning was a secretive process that could only be acquired anonymously and could not be shared openly. Specifically, learning that concerned aspects of envy, competition, succession, and the existence of relationships across hierarchical, racial, and cultural boundaries, all of which might lead to conflict, was to be strictly avoided at all cost (Lawrence et al., 1996). Additionally, the learning that did occur did not represent internalizing, connected behaviour, but a 'temporary and opportunistic "attaching" ' to something that was ostensibly similar to oneself,

hence the focus on the maintenance of pairings and triangularized unions (*ibid.*, p. 42).

It was my impression that members' feelings about race were deeply embedded into the informal conference system. For the most part, my valence at conferences is to speak about racial dynamics, partly as a way of decreasing my anxiety, which is usually related to being one of only a few members of colour at conferences that are attended primarily by White members, and in part as a way of managing projective material that is often directed at me and other members of colour. I also speak about race as an expression of my commitment to the exploration of racial and cultural dynamics within groups and organizations. Additionally, I tend to gravitate towards, and join with, other members who express similar sentiments. However, at this conference, when I spoke about race and culture and my experience of it, with the exception of two or three members, my comments were met with an uncomfortable silence during the small, large, and institutional/intergroup event sessions, and it began to feel as if I was doing something wrong. Early on, however, during informal conference time, a number of members of diverse nationalities began to approach me to discuss their own experiences with anti-Semitism, racism, and marginalization. Several conference members also approached me to discuss love affairs/intimate relationships that they had had with others of a different race and/or nationality, and one participant acknowledged having a bi-racial child as a result of partnering with someone of a different race.

These bits of information, although interesting, felt confessional; members' confessions about race, ethnicity, and interracial mixing that were deemed taboo to discuss openly in our small and large groups, and during the conference as a whole. It was also interesting to me that my desire to speak about race had led me to become the designated container of some members' confessions about race. Moreover, whenever I enquired about why they were not speaking about these issues in the formal conference system, my colleagues, ironically, would express their fears about doing so related to their anxiety about containment of projective material concerning race, while seemingly unaware that they were, in fact, enacting this projective process with me. Ultimately, none of them chose to speak of these issues during formal conference events. As an African American woman, having had the experience at conferences and in society of receiving unwanted projections about race whether I chose to receive them or not, I generally had very little sympathy for my colleagues and their indulgence in maintaining the privilege of

their whiteness in the formal conference setting by denying their interracial connections, however salient they may have been.

This silence about racial-cultural dynamics extended to the staff as well, who failed, despite their superficial representations of diversity in composition (and what appeared to the membership to be evidence of their own struggles with exploring race and culture), to facilitate the membership's processing of its complex racial and cultural dynamics. In addition to poor staff management within and across boundaries, I believe that what occurred at this conference was connected, at a variety of levels, to a culture of struggle about personal boundaries concerning race and culture. Among the White staff and membership, it seemed that the struggle and selfishness was embodied in a sense of avoiding unwanted projections about race (e.g., an *as if* assumption that silence about racial matters would negate projections), as well as a desire to maintain the privileges that often come with having White skin, related in this context to hiding and/or detaching from alliances with the 'other' in the formal conference setting while engaging in 'opportunistic attaching' to representations of the other during informal conference time (Lawrence et al., 1996, p. 42). Among the staff and membership who were of colour, it seemed as if the struggle and selfishness was embodied in a sense of ambivalence about their status as 'other', and the internalized conflicts concerning acceptance and/or rejection of projections related to this dynamic.

Learning about the dynamics of race and culture at this conference was impeded by the conference staff and membership's inability to explore these issues openly. Complex, less visible, dynamics among this culturally diverse conference population that were related to ethnicity, nationality, language, and social class remained mostly unvoiced and unexplored in the formal conference system. Thus, it would seem that the act of detaching, at multiple group levels, from shared learning about cultural dynamics, was, for staff and members, an integral part of the formal conference structure. In the light of the staff and members' struggles with management of boundaries, detachment may also have been adaptive for the survival of the temporary institution as a whole.

CONCLUSION

It would seem that the significance of the informal system within the temporary institution is related to the containment function it provides for further, selective exploration and enactment of conscious and unconscious processes that have their genesis in the formal

system. Basic assumption functioning, specifically related to baM behaviour, in the realm of a defence against W and other ba groups, which can be characterized by opportunistic attaching, anonymous, selective, and secretive learning, seems to be an integral part of the dynamics of the informal system (Lawrence et al., 1996). The two systems are interrelated and cannot exist without each other; but it would seem that the formal conference and/or conference-like system, as the embodiment of the Tavistock model, often fails to provide the containment function necessary to stimulate the integration of data that is consciously and unconsciously processed and enacted in both the formal and informal conference systems. If, as has previously been hypothesized, informal conference dynamics are strongly related to a continuation of ba functioning, perhaps the difficulty in creating a temporary institution that provides adequate containment also lies in the existing split, theoretically, between ba group functioning and work group functioning.

The vignettes in this paper revealed that topics that are experienced as having the most potential for conflict within groups and institutions, for example, race, culture, gender, and sexual orientation, are also often ambivalently held within groups, and are thus more likely to lend themselves to unconscious expression and/or enactment in the realm of ba functioning. Race, culture, gender, and sexual orientation, among other constructs are also intricately related to aspects of power, privilege, authority, and hierarchical dynamics within groups and society at large (McRae and Short, 2005). If existing theory perpetuates a split between ba and work group functioning, the implication is that open exploration about these potentially volatile topics within the formal conference structure is unsafe and/or dangerous and can therefore be safely expressed only within the informal system. This implication and the enactment of it, however, often serves to inhibit or destroy the potential for shared learning and collaboration within the temporary institution as a whole. Thus, the conference structures, formal and informal, as they have existed for the last half century, although capable of imparting important and useful information about group functioning, can be viewed also as perpetuating dysfunction concerning the relationship between cultural dynamics and group functioning.

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