CHAPTER ELEVEN

Group relations and twelve-step recovery: mixing oil and water?

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Introduction

This chapter describes the development of a series of group relations conferences designed to compare and contrast two different models of authority and leadership as they might apply in the process of recovery from addiction: the group relations conference in the Tavislock tradition and the Twelve Step model first developed in the fellowship of AA. As the conference director, I am an addiction psychiatrist and group psychotherapist with more than twenty-five years of experience in both group relations conference work and Twelve-Step recovery. The vision of mounting such a conference was inspired by a series of conferences directed by Garrett O’Connor in the late 1980s with the theme of recovery from alcoholism. Two events nearly twenty years later catalysed the first conference in Chicago on “Authority and Leadership in Recovery from Addiction” in 2011: first was my attending the 2009 Leicester Conference as a member, and second was the initiation of a new programme for social work students at Loyola University Chicago to become certified addictions counsellors. The Leicester conference featured a structural innovation of a Yoga Event, which I would change into a Twelve-Step Event in
these conferences. The new programme for social work students provided a foundation for a membership of the fledgling conference.

An extensive literature is available on Twelve-Step programmes. Two of the most studied programmes are AA (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1985) and Al-Anon (Al-Anon Family Group, 1997), a mutual support group for the families and friends of alcoholics. Twelve-Step programmes function according to the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, the importance of which is briefly summarised as follows.

- The Twelve Steps outline a path of recovery for each individual.
- The Twelve Traditions outline a path of recovery for each group and the fellowship as a whole.
- These steps and traditions are guidelines, not rules.
- While the sequence of the steps logically progress from surrender, to internal examination, to external change, and then to maintenance of the recovery process, the steps may be practised in any order.
- The traditions protect the group from three covert processes (Roth, 1991) described by Wilfred Bion (1959) that may interfere with the work task of the group: fight/flight, dependence, and pairing.

One may hear in a Twelve-Step meeting that the steps were designed to prevent us from killing ourselves, and the traditions were designed to prevent us from killing each other.

Table 11.1 describes some of the differences and similarities of group relations work and Twelve-Step recovery.

Other than facing the challenge of studying the group and organisational dynamics of recovery from addiction, the issue of special relationships between and among staff and members played a pivotal role in both conferences. Both the staff group and the membership contained a number of current and former patients of the director, and the relationships among staff and among members were characterised by analogous authority relationships of varying complexity. These special relationships mirror the experience in the world outside of the context of group relations conferences: for instance, when people attend a Twelve-Step meeting for the purpose of recovery and encounter friends, neighbours and potentially those over whom they have authority outside of the meeting.
Table 11.1. Differences and similarities between group relations work and Twelve-Step recovery.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Differences</th>
<th>Twelve-Step programmes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temporary</td>
<td>Enduring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed system</td>
<td>Open system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free interaction</td>
<td>No crosstalk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-member roles split</td>
<td>Member roles equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority defined by outside agency</td>
<td>Authority from higher power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group focused learning</td>
<td>Individually focused healing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exercise personal role authority to accomplish work of the group</td>
<td>Surrender self authority for authority of group</td>
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**Similarities**

- Experiential learning
- Self-exploration
- Self-discovery
- Self-expression
- Acknowledge the power of irrationality
- Interdependence and collaboration
- Belief in groups as systems
- Whole is greater than sum of parts
- Recognise the power of the group
- Facilitate growth and transformation
- Concern with leadership and authority

Recruitment of members was successful for both of the first two conferences. By the time of publication of this chapter, a third conference was held in January 2013, a fourth conference was held in January 2014, and a fifth conference was held in May 2014 in Beijing. The addition of Twelve-Step meetings was the only structural innovation for what were otherwise standard, non-residential weekend conferences. Members and staff attended these Twelve-Step meetings in the same role as would be practised in any Twelve-Step meeting; as a person hoping to learn about their attachment to addiction in themselves or others. The impact of introducing these Twelve-Step meetings into a GRC is the continuing object of study. Therefore, these conferences are in a process of development, and some of the disruptive influences of this structural innovation might become clear only as these conferences continue to be offered.
provocative consultation disturbed this AA member, who had learnt to apply rigid control to his destructive impulses, causing profound anxiety. His verbalisation of this struggle brought this man to shaking and tears.

Unfortunately, when belief in the Twelve-Step method might have been questioned, the staff not involved in that method remained largely silent. The question for me was: how did I lose my group relations interpretative abilities, and what did this represent in this conference? The most obvious issue was that the conference director’s patients and supervisees were in both the staff and the membership. This was acknowledged, but no attempt was made to consider the effects of this on the work of the conference. As usual in conference work, there was a wish to have the director of the conference be either the supreme therapist or perhaps even an all-powerful deity. His position as LC team leader with two new LC staff members and one well-known Twelve Step colleague made this role difficult to resist. During the conference, in a staff meeting, I became filled with anxiety, sadness, and an overwhelming concern about the blurring of boundaries, the religious-like acceptance of the Twelve-Step programme, and the unconscious issues that were not being worked. I brought this up in tears and said that I thought I was carrying something for the conference, but was not sure what it was. My invitation to work the issues of voicelessness on the staff was not taken up.

In summary, my experience in the first Chicago conference was that both Twelve Step and group relations work were truncated and distorted, and that the consulting staff members were largely silent in this struggle. The relationships among the members were unexamined and undiscussed, in direct contravention to group relations’ principles. If there is to be an exploration of the possible relationship between the two approaches, a more integrative approach will need to be employed in the future.

Finding our voices in a new arena: group relations
conferences and authority and leadership
in recovery from addiction: Vivian Gold

These conferences extend the Tavistock approach beyond our usual networks as an opportunity to explore the issues that occur in any
GRC in a new arena, that of addiction and recovery. They are an applica-
tion of group relations' principles, where we offer a systems persp-
pective and a view of unconscious processes at work within the
systems that maintain addictions. Two aspects of the 2011 and 2012
conferences created specific areas of chaos and conflict: (1) spirituality
vs. religion as conference phenomena, and (2) the multiple relation-
ships within the staff, the membership, and across the boundaries
between staff and membership.

The issue of splitting between those in the Twelve-Step recovery
programmes and those not committed to these programmes was rife
from the very beginning of our telephone staff work. My desire to
help contain the chaos led me to accept the role of associate confer-
ence director that Dr Roth had offered. That the issue of spirituality
became prominent within the conference is not surprising, since all
conferences are microcosms of larger social issues, and the split
between those who are religious and those who are secular is one of
the most cogent issues dividing people today. We often assume that
most consultants who work in this field are secular. However, I believe
that we see the conference dynamics in the light of our overt or covert
spiritual beliefs, and that as these beliefs emerge, they are present to
be studied. The religious aspects not only created conflict at our
conferences, they are part of ongoing conflicts within and surround-
ing the Twelve-Step programmes. Other approaches exist for secular
people who prefer not to engage in any programme invoking a
"higher power". In my opinion, these issues were both enacted, inter-
preted, and studied in the 2011–2 012 group relations conferences
presented here.

Many of us were shocked and troubled when we discovered that
among both the staff and the members were people recruited from
among Dr Roth's patients within his practice, as well as the student
and patient populations of other staff members. This was a contro-
versial dynamic that had to be worked through in both conferences.
The relationships were not held in secret, and the enactments that
occurred were in the open, giving the staff and the membership an
opportunity to work deep issues of favouritism, envy, rage, and gra-
titude. The Twelve-Step programmes have an ethos that we are all
equals in our common humanity, culpabilities, and vulnerabilities.
That this equality can exist while issues of authority and leadership
are explored is what created much of the tension that pushed the staff
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boundaries, generating both stress and creativity. Members and staff experiencing being silenced, and a member finding her voice in a scream in the large group in 2012, were some of my most poignant memories of the conferences. In this chapter, we have a variety of voices with different views on what happened. In my view, these conferences were like others I have attended, definitively group relations conferences, with a twist.

Group relations and Twelve-Step recovery

as a lived experience: Seth Harkins

I attended my first group relations conference at Northwestern University in 1985. The experience was profound and career changing. Without it, my career in educational administration would have been short-lived. Simultaneously, I was struggling with progressive alcoholism. I attended my first AA meeting in August 1988, convinced I had walked into a religious cult. While I did not immediately buy into AA, I stopped drinking after my first meeting and kept going. Although unwilling to accept God as my higher power, it was easy to accept the group and AA as my higher power.

In 1996, I attended a nine-day residential conference at Vassar College in New York. I went to the conference solo. I found myself linking with a subgroup of three Chicago area members, all in recovery and associated with Dr Jeffrey Roth. I was keenly aware that alcohol was used by members and staff at the Vassar Conference, as I had experienced it being used at other conferences as well. It simply was not talked about. This struck me as the “no talk” rule in alcoholic families.

In 2004, I was invited to be a small group consultant in a group relations conference directed by Dr Jeffrey Roth. The conference theme was authority and power in social systems and the family. This conference marked my early attempts to integrate the worlds of group relations and recovery in my consulting. The group relations concepts of splitting, projection, projective identification, and group-as-a-whole began to merge with Twelve-Step concepts of higher power, surrender to the group, group conscience, fearless and searching moral inventory, character defects and spiritual awakening. I began integrating my roles as group relations consultant and a person in recovery.
As a consultant in the 2011 and 2012 Loyola University group relations conference; “Authority, Leadership and Recovery from Addiction”, I had the opportunity to further my enquiry. The overarching question for me was: could the language and cultures of group relations and recovery actually be integrated to enhance learning about authority, leadership, and unconscious phenomena? Searching for ways to consult from the group relations and Twelve Step parts of my brain, finding my voice as a consultant in recovery was a challenge. Was an empty chair about a member having “gone back out”? Was basic assumption process evident in the group behaving as if it were an addicted family? Could I attend an AA meeting with members and retain legitimate authority as a consultant? In the 2011 conference, I sometimes could not find my non-recovering colleague in the large study group. In the 2012 conference, I was challenged with the unconscious location of the previous year’s conflict involving a recovering therapist and multiple special relationships in my small group.

Hoping to learn as much as possible from the 2011 experience, I took copious field notes with the thought of writing auto-ethnography of my conference experience. I ended this conference experience convinced that research into the lived experience of the conference needed to be undertaken. With Drs John Bair and Shelley Korschak, I examined the qualitative data and wrote a comprehensive article (Harkins et al., 2013). Similar studies of the 2012 and 2013 conferences are under way to better understand the intersection of the two different languages, cultures, and traditions. What I found in the 2011 and 2012 conferences is that, despite the differences, these two different approaches to group learning could indeed inform one another and enhance the recovery of persons and systems challenged with addiction. I found I could speak with a new level of authority, enhancing my role as a consultant and deepening my recovery.

.Does violation of usual group relation conference boundaries between staff and members corrupt the GRC experience?

John B. Robertson Jr.

Transference and countertransference are powerful experiences in every GRC. Analysing these responses, both individually and as
group phenomena, provide much of the transformative learning. The issues of transferences within the boundaries of the GRC might become less clear when data about the staff or membership are available from sources other than within the boundaries of the GRC. Unique to this GRC was an opportunity for membership to experience staff in a non-staff role, which was integrated in the form of Twelve-Step recovery groups. During these Twelve-Step groups, staff and members became equal participants. For me, there were two broad take-home points from the conference.

First, transference was clearly affected by the introduction of Twelve-Step groups into a traditional GRC. This resulted in significant changes in the member and staff experience. However, the achievement of the primary learning task was not diminished.

Second, recruitment for these conferences has been successful despite many other GRCs during this time having to be cancelled due to lack of membership. Clearly, the Twelve-Step recovering community offers enormous membership potential for GRC work.

I anticipated that the addition of Twelve-Step group process would be like grafting a branch on to the primary group relations conference plant. Instead, my experience was that this marriage of two powerful methods of doing groups gave birth to something unique and very different from either parent, with its own DNA structure equally contributed by both parents. Like a child from parents of mixed race or ethnicity, the unique blending creates shared characteristics of both, yet distinctly differs from both.

So, what do you get when you marry Twelve-Step programmes and group relations? Group relations conference work is about learning how groups function, and especially about the role of authority. Twelve-Step learning is about how the individual functions, especially about improving that function by substituting higher power authority for self-authority. For me, the resulting event is softer and gentler emotionally than usual group relations conference work with less regression psychologically and a more therapeutic component.

Two main attributes might account for my experience of this marriage: (1) the larger than usual number of special relationships within Twelve-Step recovery groups and, therefore, within our conference and (2) the distinct differences in authority structure between the two different models, Twelve-Step recovery and group relations. For Twelve-Step groups, confidentiality and anonymity, as well as having
memberships that are both open and non-hierarchical, results in groups that tolerate multiple special relationships. This is different from most groups, which are unable to tolerate and function well with multiple special relationships.

The other primary reason that transference energy is diminished is related to the healing goal of Twelve-Step work and its use of transference to a personal higher power. Transference is transformed by at least two factors: (1) focus on self, and (2) focus on personal higher power. Replacing the usual triangulated relationship among the individual, group, and designated authority structure, the individual in recovery from addiction may use the group and designated authority structure as components of a personal higher power. In essence, the personal higher power modulates the compulsion to locate a higher power in the director and staff with regard to significance for that person's experience and learning.

Because of the comforting relationship with a personal higher power, there are fewer and less intense paranoid projections and unrealistic expectations regarding staff authority. Over and over during this GRC, individuals made reference to their higher power with the effect of diminishing conflicts with the role of conference staff authority. Often, in my role as small group consultant, I experienced fewer attempts to deify me. Indeed, interpretations regarding my small group consultant role and its relationship to the authority of the director were largely ignored. By contrast, I saw a combining of authority of higher power with that of our director. More than once participants made the comment that "Dr Roth saved my life", indicating a great deal of almost supernatural attribution of his gifted ability as a clinician to affect them personally.

Conclusion

Even as group relations conference work and Twelve-Step recovery represent two very different cultures, languages, and traditions, including different conceptualisations of authority, role, task, and boundaries, the integration of these two models has generated a series of stable conferences. The diversity of experiences of the consultants participating in the writing of this chapter accurately reflects the tensions that these conferences embody. We return to their voices:
“I was seriously considering withdrawing from the staff due to some pre-staff work that seemed to be dominated by Twelve Step references. Jeffrey assured me that other voices needed to be and would be heard.”

“I see the 2011 and 2012 conferences as the creative work of Dr Roth, his staff and others deeply involved with and interested in studying authority issues in addiction and recovery. Dr Roth stretches the boundaries of group relations work in an exciting and important arena. In Jewish tradition, a fruit tree takes three years to flourish. May the 2013 Group Relations Conference on Addiction and Recovery have a fruitful year, and be the forerunner of many more.

“How could I incorporate the language of recovery with the language of group relations?”

“In Tennessee, the southern part of the United States where I live, we have a saying, ‘There is more than one way to skin a cat.’ What I have learnt from my experience participating in a group relation conference that integrated Twelve Step recovery groups is that each group model brings with it a rich tradition and learning that is powerfully effective educationally and therapeutically. Having membership and staff with a variety of experiences, some with and some without prior experience in both group models, created a wonderfully creative tapestry rich in the depths of colour and opportunities for learning and healing at various levels.”

References


