Group relations organisations and conferences as a fractal of society: how group relations work in different countries has been shaped by national variables of history, economics, politics, culture, and geography

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ABSTRACT
This article follows the Eric Miller memorial lecture given on 1 April 2023. Based on interviews with many group relations practitioners worldwide, the article explores how group relations organisations and conferences are shaped by national variables of history, economics, politics, culture, and geography. Links between current practices in organisations and the connection of those practices to background forces are suggested. The significance of the patrons of group relations work, geography, religion and spirituality, trauma, and origin stories for the development of organisations and conferences are examined. Some current worldwide system dynamics are explored. The author's identity as an American, White man, and its relevance to the research is considered.

Keywords: Group relations, national, fractal, systems psychodynamics, Eric Miller.

This article is based on the talk I gave for OPUS at the Eric Miller memorial lecture on 1 April 2023. I did not know Eric Miller. I gained some feel for him from Eliat Aram's tribute lecture last year (Aram, 2022). I read selections of his voluminous work. I liked imagining an indirect connection to him from my connection to Mannie Sher and Kathy White, colleagues and teachers of mine who were close colleagues and friends of Eric. Eric Miller's name often came up spontaneously as I was speaking with people whilst researching this article. I came to realise that I am a beneficiary of Miller's vision and legacy of improving the human condition, worldwide, through the application of social science research and thinking.

The idea for my talk came from a conversation I had with Olya Khaleelee. Olya pointed to a study she and Kathy White (2014) conducted in which they interviewed group relations conference directors from around the world about whether and how they introduced innovations into traditional conference designs. Their article is a touchstone for group relations conference directors. Olya suggested that I might do a similar study but in this case talk with leaders of group relations organisations in different countries regarding how the development of the organisation and conferences in a particular country reflected aspects of a its unique historical, social, political, economic, and cultural characteristics.

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I chose the word "fractal" for the title of this article because it was a catchy term to characterise this sort of patterning. Evidence for fractal patterning of human organisations can be understood from the perspective of the social brain hypothesis. Webber and Dunbar (2020) suggest, for example, that the time costs of maintaining human relationships in large communities leads to the formation of subgroups, managed by elites, which form as "layered structures", or fractals, of the community.

Miller himself suggested (Brunner, 2002) that what happens in a group relations conference can be a microcosm of what is going on in a society although the extent to which that is the case is mediated by the containment offered by the conference director and staff. The idea of microcosm is congruent with open systems theory which is a more familiar group relations language relevant to thinking about how organisations or conferences reflect the environment in which they are embedded. Open systems theory posits that no one element of a physical, biological, or human system is isolated. Every part is connected to every other part in some way. Systems thinking suggests that to understand the workings of any particular phenomenon we need to look at the phenomenon in its context. Fraher (2004) offers a historical review of "group-as-a-whole" systems thinking and its relevance to systems psychodynamics and a group relations lens.

Leroy Wells, Jr (1985) added a psychoanalytic perspective to open systems thinking. Wells wrote about the commonality of experiences between the infant's relationship with the mothering object and the individual's relationship with the group. In both instances we feel conflict—both needing and hating our dependency on the mother and on the group. Individuals and groups deal with this emotional conflict through the defensive use of projection, projective identification, and introjection. Wells uses the word "lattice" to refer to the complex patterning of roles and enactments that occur in human systems when parts of the whole continually respond to each other in the projective back and forth loop occurring in a system.

For this presentation I spoke with about thirty people. What I report are my take-aways from those conversations. I know that in some cases I will inadvertently misrepresent some organisations and their history. I also know that within any organisation some will have perspectives that differ from the ones I report here. I'm not attempting to offer definitive analyses here. My goal is to help us think together about ideas and connections.

I will begin simply. I will cite examples of group relations work reflecting wider national dynamics in each of the three group relations communities I know best—the A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems (AKRI), the Lithuanian Group Relations Society, and the group relations community in China. I'll then track some themes—patrons, geography, religion and spirituality, trauma and memory, and originator– that are common across clusters of different group relations organisations. I'll consider some current worldwide systemic dynamics.

I had to shorten the running header to fit, is GR OK for shortened Group Relations? Or please suggest alternative wording that may fit, thanks.

Examples from the United States, Lithuania, and China

AKRI is the US national group relations organisation. It is affiliated with six regional group relations organisations within the country. There is always tension between AKRI and the regional affiliates around issues of independence and collaboration. Not by coincidence, this structure is a fractal of the wider American government structure. The United States has always struggled with conflict between the rights of its now fifty individual states to govern themselves and the hegemony of a national system to whose laws states must conform. AKRI is right at home when it and its affiliates tussle around their relationship with each other.

Related, when international members attend group relations conferences in the United States, they are often puzzled by how dialogue in American conferences is full of conflict and discussion around Black–White racial dynamics. This is the case because conferences in the US reflect unresolved racial dynamics in the country. The US economic system was built on the enslavement of Black people by White people. Black people were viewed not only as not citizens but not even as people. To this day there have not been reparations for this practice in the US. A preoccupation with racial dynamics in conference life in the US very much reflects the centrality of the struggle for racial reckoning, and strong resistance to that reckoning, in US society.

In another country, Lithuania, conference titles do not stray far from citing leadership and authority as themes to study. Conference work itself rarely strays from dynamics around authority and the director's authority. This reflects legacy of the Soviet years. During Soviet times, the occupying government was not trusted. Citizens did not trust the authority of leaders. The country is only recently independent. As legacy, citizens distrust even those who are now their own democratically elected government authorities. Conference themes reflect this continuing tension within Lithuanian society.

Group relations work in China is especially complex. There is tremendous push to grow and expand group relations organisations in China as formal business structures with strict hierarchies. There is intense competition amongst a small group of women leading the work. Their competition with each other veers towards being toxic and destructive.

China's rush to build formal group relations organisational structures mirrors the rapid economic modernisation path set in China over the past thirty years by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Cities were built before populations were available to inhabit them. Western business production models were hurriedly copied. Structures and products were embraced or imposed before internally generated creative ideas could ferment, rise organically, and take form. The emphasis on structure makes it difficult to assess the depth of group relations learning in China because events have a performative feel to them. The CCP-like top-down organising strategy also contributes to the toxic competition amongst group relations leadership. There is little curiosity about, or tolerance for, different ideas amongst those competing for leadership. Instead, interest in power dominates. Distrust amongst leaders is reminiscent of the

competition for limited resources that led neighbour to distrust neighbour during the Great Leap Forward of 1958–1962 and the resultant Great Famine of 1959–1961. There is fear within the Chinese group relations community that the current toxic competition may also back shadow the violence of the Chinese cultural revolution and the Tiananmen Square massacre that occurred in the 1970s in response to anxieties around the rapid, top-down economic development at the time. At the same time, the Communist Revolution of 1949 and the later atrocities are also a response to the history of colonial exploitation of China by Western powers. Great Britain, Russia, Japan, Portugal, and others incited violence against the Qing dynasty in order to divide the country and establish their own spheres of influence. The Chinese were humiliated at the time. After the Revolution the Chinese were determined to be strong and united to resist a return of colonialism. This history is replicating itself now as group relations organisations such as AKRI and Tavistock attempt to plant their flags in the lucrative Chinese market. The infighting within the Chinese group relations community may be connected to the interests of the outsiders to divide and conquer by providing support for their preferred warring faction.

Patrons of group relations work

Who authorises and funds group relations work in a country has significant consequences. For example, group relations work tends to take a particular path when it commences and is supported by business institutions.

The experience in Chile is a prime example. When the originator of group relations in Chile wanted to develop the work in that country a military dictatorship was in power. The dictatorship was wary of a social science experiment that might raise questions around authority. It shut down group relations work in the social sciences department of the major university where it was first located. It humiliated the faculty who were involved. However, at the same time the dictatorship was interested in the economy and money. Maybe group relations ideas could help make business management more efficient. The dictatorship allowed group relations work to lodge in the business school of that same university. The work has been located in the business school ever since even though the dictatorship is now gone and Chile is a democratic country. This continues to be the case because Chile's economy is extreme in following an American neo-liberal model. Privatisation of government services is common. It is very expensive to live in the country. Citizens struggle alone to pay for basic services such as electricity, water, and pension funding. In this context group relations continues to be an adjunct to business development and is still isolated in the business school of the University. It has not moved outside into the community. Conference members are students, required to attend a conference, and they rarely return. The current leader of group relations in Chile feels alone and isolated as a psychoanalyst in a business department that does not connect to his wider societal interests.

A more complex example might be South Africa. Group relations work in South Africa was started by three women social workers. Conference work was non-profit and supported by grants from the Kellogg Foundation in the United States. Later, as funding from Kellogg ended and there was a desire to no longer be dependent upon foreign resources, there was movement towards a for-profit group relations model. The Robben Island conferences were based on this model. However, that model was not sustainable. It cost too much to recruit membership and to staff conferences. The Robben Island conferences were discontinued. Subsequently group relations work has become lodged in an industrial and organisational psychology organisation whose explicit mission is to promote business objectives and the work environment. It has been very difficult to organise a national group relations organisation in South Africa. This situation reflects business conditions on the ground in South Africa. Following the end of apartheid the government enterprises operating the power grid, transportation, healthcare, and education industries were sold off to politically connected individuals who were often not competent to manage them and often corrupt. Those corrupt business interests find value in keeping citizens of South Africa apart from each other—a sort of re-engineering of an apartheid system with different faces in leadership positions. There is no national group relations organisation in South Africa. The leaders of group relations work in South Africa feel beleaguered. They wrestle as individuals with the burden of sustaining group relations work in South Africa without a sturdy national institution to underpin them. In a way, they feel imprisoned, emotionally and creatively, by the corruption and abuses of the current South African socio-economic, political system which replicates vestiges of the old.

In Russia, as in Chile, group relations work is lodged in the business school of a major university. Group relations has been introduced in Russia by maverick individuals more than by institutions. The work has an oligarchy feel to it rather than an institutional exchange. Group relations conferences or workshops in Russia focus primarily on group dynamics relevant to management groups and less on authority, leadership, and power dynamics. This limited scope of exploration connects directly to the limits, and fears, that citizens in Russia feel around speaking openly about authority, leadership, and power. Currently in Russia the government crackdown on dissent makes free expression and examination dangerous. The long history of collective trauma from the time of the Soviet Union still lingers and infects Russia, as in Lithuania, and further makes people reluctant to become a representative on behalf of others. Whilst the self-authorising, maverick model of introducing group relations to Russia can be associated with the prominence of the strongman oligarch, that model can also be associated with the prominence in Russian history of strong individual dissidents such as Solzhenitsyn and now Navalny. At the moment there is a beginning collaboration of the individuals working in Russia to do so under the umbrella of Group Relations Russia (GRR) sponsored by the Tavistock Institute. If that collaboration between institutions and institution building is sustainable it may be a fractal of something

emerging in Russian society that is tentative and with implications that are still too early to clearly see.

Business needs and government priorities have also affected how group relations has developed in Finland. Finland's government supports leadership training for government leaders and specialists. In that context Metanoia offers leadership training to such individuals through its connections to two business schools. However, as in Chile, this has inhibited development of a robust group relations conference culture in Finland. Conferences are not part of the training. People who complete the training are later invited to attend a group relations conference but conferences are organised only every other year and there are few repeat members from one conference to the next. Metanoia has also been conducting training with a labour union in Finland. Interestingly there has been more success in bringing group relations conference work into the partnership with the labour union than with the government actors.

Miller, Rice, and others developed a group relations, systems psychodynamics lens that informs a model for organisational consulting to businesses. There is tremendous value in that. At the same time, when the host or sponsor of group relations work is an economics centred entity there seems to be tendency for the work to remain in a business context and not cross over into the wider public sphere.

Geography

Geography is another element relevant to how group relations develops in a particular country. Canada and Finland are both countries that share long borders with behemoth neighbours. In general, both countries have had to differentiate and be "modest in [their] ambitions" and "stay in their own field". In step with the national narrative, each country has found a particular group relations niche. In Canada, Insight for Community Impact (ICI)'s group relations model is different from many others. ICI is not a national group relations organisation. It is involved in community activism work. Its group relations conferences are not temporary institutions. Group relations work in Finland also has its own niche. As mentioned earlier, Metanoia focuses on training programmes for government leaders through a network of business schools. The specialised missions and tighter focus in both Canada and Finland reflect a culture of moderation of goals associated with living in the shadow of larger, powerful neighbours.

In a different way geography has also been central to how group relations work has developed in Italy. The topography of Italy extends from the highest mountains of Northern Europe to the Mediterranean where the country almost touches Africa. Early group relations conferences in Northern Italy felt colonial in that they mimicked the British model. The emphasis on authority and leadership felt stiff and limited, mostly intellectual, and with little emotion and no physicality. Conferences took place in the bubble of an expensive hotel. One conference went bankrupt when it couldn't pay the hotel bill. New

leadership in Italy moved group relations work to the South. There the geography, weather, and affordability of the Mediterranean lent itself more to the here-and-now, the senses, and even singing and dancing in conference work. The Italians began to find the Italian soul of group relations work in the South. Later, informed by the South, the challenges of organising conferences in the expensive North led to creative conference innovations there. The Italians returned North but rather than holding a conference at an expensive, posh hotel it rented a house belonging to the Church. In order to save money, the conference membership shopped for their own food, cooked themselves, and cleaned the kitchen. This became the structure of the conference intergroup event. The different meal preparation subgroups examined how they worked together and what they represented in the conference system. In Italy, the land and connectedness to the land are an element of the conference and have been an impetus for creative development in conference design. Well-being, focus on the body in connection to the earth, sustainability, and collaborative processes of authority and leadership with a horizontal rather than vertical orientation are values of Il Nodo's Energy, Creative Collaboration, and Well-being (ECW) conferences. This orientation moves away from a mechanistic view of life towards a systemic view that draws from the sense of our connectedness to the land and nature.

Religion and spirituality

Religion is another differentiating element affecting how group relations organisations develop. Israel, for example, is a Jewish state. It is not a formal religious state but Judaism is dominant in its DNA. The Israeli Association for the Study of Group and Organizational Processes (OFEK), the Israeli group relations organisation, tends to be very conservative in its orientation. Psychoanalysis and open systems theory are its two pillars of orientation. OFEK does not stray from those pillars. How might that be a fractal of the Jewish state? Orthodox Judaism is known for its focus on Talmudic studies—the relentless turning over and over again of centuries old questions of rabbinical debate. OFEK models that method of inquiry. In the organisation and its conferences OFEK turns psychoanalytic and systems questions arising in the work over and over again. OFEK stays true to core practices and resists being seduced by faddish prophets. As reported in the Bible, the Hebrews followed a column of smoke provided by God to guide them out of the desert to the promised land. In OFEK, psychoanalysis and open systems thinking is the column of smoke to follow.

Judaism also reflects in the work of the International Forum for Social Innovation (IFSI) in France. IFSI's leadership identifies with their Jewish identity, although this is more cultural than religious. IFSI's leadership identifies as bicultural as it also proudly proclaims its frenchness. Whilst OFEK identifies as traditionally conservative, IFSI's style of group relations work is what I would name as radically conservative. IFSI holds allegiance to traditional boundaries in conference design but is openly political, confrontational, and emotional in

its orientation to conference work. It fiercely rejects what it considers to be "woke" generalisations around race and gender. Its practice of authorising its leadership is unusual, being both French in the sense of monarchical succession of power and biblical in the sense of enacting ancient stories of fraternal rivalry. The unique group relations organisational dynamics of IFSI did not develop randomly. They reflect the complexities of bicultural identity, diaspora dynamics, and traditions of independent French and Jewish intellectualism.

Whilst religion perspectives can inform group relations work, in some cases they can be an impediment to that work. The unconscious is not regulated by religious authorities. In Moscow that can be a problem because people are wary of the reality that group relations perspectives may not correlate with traditional Russian Orthodox religious perspectives. That can also be the case in Iran where Shia Islam is the official state religion of the Islamic Republic. It can be argued that the impediments in those countries are not religious but political. In the Caribbean the Western notion of the unconscious does not fit well with popular religious traditions. Race is a treacherous subject in the Caribbean where people of different races may get along quite well in the countryside but feel distrust and resentment towards each other around national policies and government. Blacks in the Caribbean tend to be wary of examining the unconscious because there is so much trauma stored there from the colonialist past. Obeah is a common religious perspective in the Caribbean, rooted in African traditions, that addresses the practical relationship of humans to underworld spirits. The religious belief of Obeah is a salve for wounds whilst the unconscious may re-open those wounds. Whilst there are multiple factors contributing to the fitful development of group relations in the Caribbean, including continued colonisation dynamics and geographical scatter, religious beliefs are a part of resistance to the work in the region.

Group relations thinking and practice in India reflects the spiritual depth and traditions of the country. Valuing compassion and the body–mind connection are explicitly named and integrated into conference design in India. Openness to "not knowing" is viewed as an important orientation for conference learning and as essential to any process of transformation. "Knowing" has value but can also reinforce prescribed, ingrained ways of thinking that obstruct creative development. Group Relations India (2019) asks what intentions, risks, and choices are we willing to take or avoid "where what one took as the truth yesterday becomes a question mark today, and may well become obsolete tomorrow?". One wonders how this sense of impermanence and attitude of openness to mystery might have seeped into Bion's psyche when he was a boy in India, where he was born, and influenced his thinking about "O" and working with "no memory and no desire" (Gairola, 2022).

In India accessing spirituality is also used to counter basic assumption "me"ness. Traditional Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalytic perspectives focus on early childhood dynamics between the young and their caregivers. But what about deeper human connections that transcend the individual and

narcissism? During a large study group in an Indian conference, as compared to Western conferences, less attention is paid to member fantasies, particularly oedipal fantasies, regarding the authority of the director or director pair. Instead, more attention is paid to social hierarchies existing in subgroups within the membership. This reflects the significance of the explicit identification of subgroup hierarchy in the caste system of Indian culture and also in the spiritual sense that it is an illusion to consider that there is an individual identity consciousness separate from the collective. The individual and group's relation to authority has more than infantile or oedipal origins. It also connects to generational, collective roots.

The spiritual perspectives of group relations work in India, the Caribbean, and South Africa overlap in some ways. As just stated, India's spiritual perspective places less emphasis on the individual narcissistic dynamics related to the group and makes more room for considering collective transgenerational dynamics. The active presence of Obeah spiritual culture in the Caribbean speaks to the continued presence of ancestors in everyday life. It is unwanted to bring trauma to consciousness if the experience of trauma is disconnected from active dialogue with ancestors. In South Africa, a recent conference explored ancestral meaning systems as they relate to leadership and authority (Society for Industrial and Organisational Psychology of South Africa, 2023). The conference asked "what ancestral voices might mean in a cross–trans–post-colonial epistemology of what it means to be human, and how they related to leadership and authority".

It is not a coincidence that this spiritual dimension to group relations work is located more in the global South. At the risk of oversimplification, the global North, or West, is still influenced by Cartesian dualistic thinking. The mind and body are separate. Reason, identity, and spiritual purity are elevated and dominant over mystery and not knowing. This form of dissociation thinking has been identified as a critical ideology underpinning historical and contemporary white supremacy, neocolonialism, and patriarchy in the North. The spiritual perspectives explored in group relations work in the South are relevant to understanding systems psychodynamics that maintain current institutionalised forms of racism and patriarchy and how to unwind them. Nichols and Connolly (2020), for example, using a group relations lens, invoke the image of "transforming ghosts into ancestors" in making the case for reparations to descendants of American slavery. The significance of collective, transgenerational, ancestral dynamics is increasingly recognised in the North but by using a clinical, psychoanalytic lens more than a spiritual lens (Cherepanov, 2021; Fromm, 2022; Volkan, 2010).

Trauma and memory

An emerging theme in group relations conference work is trauma. As we recognise clinically that trauma can be systemic and cumulative, the history of trauma in particular countries is increasingly recognised as a potent presence in conference life. Conference directors are beginning to take this into

account in conference design. Working with the body and creating space for expressive non-verbal, symbolic imagery are increasingly being used to both access and contain experiences of trauma that may surface during a conference.

For example, Canadian group relations is community oriented and focuses on work in immigrant communities that have been traumatised. Insight for Community Impact (ICI) in Canada incorporates body movement awareness in its conferences. It does so to access feelings held in the body related to trauma that are present in the group but are difficult to access and contain through talking alone. Because conference members often carry personal histories of trauma, the Canadians also do not design their conferences as temporary institutions. The feelings stirred up in a conference are not "over" when the conference is over. Post-conference work is integral to ICI's mission. ICI uses group relations to support a community of people who are involved in trauma related work on an ongoing basis.

Or consider the recent "Strange fruit—the poetry of hatred" conference. The evocation of lynching stirs a powerful image of the body and violence. Given what we know about the transgenerational transmission of trauma, lynching images can be especially provocative, even re-traumatising for some conference members. For this reason, the conference design included a "Sawubona" event—using stories, symbols, and poems to connect to the theme of the conference and build a story regarding how a member sees and is seen. Such an event is intended to help members to understand feelings and projections associated with both victim and perpetrator roles taken up unconsciously during the conference.

Or consider the practice of group relations in Taiwan. Conferences in Taiwan take place in the shadow of fear of invasion from China. Conference themes explicitly reference this existential threat. The threat of death is in the air and is felt. Conference organisers in Taiwan recognise that war and death are "heavy" themes that people don't typically want to deal with. Members can be "loaded up". In order to contain and help people reflect, conferences in Taiwan include a community event. The purpose of the community event is to give space for members, through art and other creative expression, to tolerate the existential fears around annihilation that are present as a backdrop for the conference.

Related to themes of geography, place, and trauma, I've been especially interested in the divergent paths that three English-speaking countries that were part of the British empire—Canada, Australia, and the United States—have taken in their relationship to the historical displacement of the indigenous populations from the land that they now inhabit. Both the Canadian and Australian governments and their respective group relations communities make some attempts to grapple with the legacy of theft and violence towards indigenous people. Canadian group relations conferences acknowledge the forebears of the land on which the conference is taking place. Grounding exercises are used in conferences to call attention to the connection to the land. Group Relations Australia (GRA) made attempts to connect to Aboriginal

communities, even organising a meeting at an Aboriginal seminary. GRA, aware of the fact that many contemporary Australians are descendants of Europeans who were once refugees themselves, organised a walking exercise to connect to the feeling experience of contemporary refugees who want to live in land that Australians now think they are entitled to claim as theirs to own.

On the other hand, neither the United States government, nor its citizenry, nor AKRI seem to pay much attention to the history and legacy of European settlers stealing land from indigenous people and creating a new nation on the other side of the Atlantic. The United States prides itself on its founding as a nation based on lofty ideals. Americans are less connected to the founding of the nation based on occupying space that is not theirs to "own". The Europeans who settled on the continent left Mother England and elsewhere in Europe to do so. Those settlers acted like they didn't need to grieve or acknowledge the loss of their mother country. Instead, they latched on to the breast of a new mother, pushing aside brothers and sisters who were there before them, and acting like they were entitled to be there all along. Americans, both in general and in conferences, use preoccupation with racial dynamics around slavery, however central to the American story, to avoid feeling the pain and guilt around this other aspect of the nation's birth trauma and origins. White Canadians and Australians, with less or no history of chattel slavery, have been better able to confront the legacies of their origin stories which involve both their own loss of motherland and the subsequent perpetration of loss upon others. In those countries the national "chosen trauma" (Volkan, 2001) is more clearly apparent than in the United States where there is competition amongst trauma and victim narratives.

United Kingdom's role as originator, mother

The role of originator is significant in any thought and practice system. Sigmund Freud is both lionised and vilified in his role as founder of psychoanalysis. The same prophet is deified in one religion and demonised in another. What does the United Kingdom carry as the place where group relations work originated?

Early roots of group relations are grounded in England with the work of Wilfred Bion, A. K. Rice, Eric Miller, and many others with the Tavistock Institute. Group relations work is now often referred to colloquially as "Tavistock" work as if the two are the same thing. The Tavistock Institute, as a business, faces a naming dilemma similar to names such as "kleenex" or "xerox" which are corporate owned brand names but used generically. On one hand it is powerful to have one's name so widely associated with a product but there is danger of losing control of one's brand or image if anyone can use the term descriptively. "Tavistock" is both coveted as an endorsing brand for group relations conferences and sometimes cursed for insisting on requirements for the use of its name.

Group relations work in the United Kingdom tends to be associated in the mind with the Tavistock Institute and the Leicester conference. In fact, the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) organises only one group relations conference a year—the two-week-long Leicester conference that draws an international membership and staff. It is unique and special in the group relations world. At the same time there are other conferences in the UK organised independently of the TIHR and Leicester. These include conferences organised by the Portman National Health Service (NHS) and by university programmes where members are mostly or exclusively students and UK residents. The university conferences have much in common with student conferences anywhere. They in serve an educational function with a captive audience and are often accompanied with the common student attitude of "what's in it for me?" that skews towards an identity focus over a systemic one.

Differences between TIHR/Leicester conference model and the NHS/university conference models may be reflecting class differences within Britain and the tensions in the UK between a monarchy/aristocratic model of state and a republic/egalitarian one. The Leicester conference can be characterised as drawing heavily on a Kleinian model of interpretation that emphasises the learning available at the boundary between the staff and membership groups. Conferences in the UK other than Leicester can be characterised as drawing more on an interrelational theoretical model with a flatter authority structure and less gradient between staff and members. Does this difference contribute to projections onto the staff of the Leicester conference veering more towards worship and adulation whilst staff at other conferences are viewed as more junior? If so, these differences may reflect the elitism and privilege in British society as a whole, particularly around wealth, education, and even the functioning of psychoanalytic institutions.

Projections regarding group relations work in the UK also tend to centre on projections around the origin of the work. Group relations work in England was begun by predominantly White men in response to war preparations and war recovery. The leadership and authority model of the Leicester conferences is often viewed as a rigid, hierarchical authority model associated with supporting White supremacy, patriarchy, and colonisation. This view makes it easier to hate the Tavistock model if one is so inclined. But the origin story of group relations in England does not necessarily match that narrative. Bion was being radical, not an establishment stiff, when he introduced working with leaderless groups in a psychiatric hospital. A. K. Rice and Eric Miller used psychoanalytic and military models to set clear time and task boundaries for conference design. However, they did so for the purpose of creating a container, to free members to explore as they wished. Conference members were under no compulsion to act in any prescribed way.

Rice and Miller were outward looking, collaborative thinkers who drew their ideas from everywhere. They were interested in exploring and interchange, not so much in control. Whilst appearing outwardly as proper British men serving the establishment, their values were aligned with feeling, mothering,

and questioning. They were wild. They were often lambasted at home for their radical work. A challenge now for people both inside and outside the UK is to assess the Tavistock "in the mind" (Armstrong, 2005). Can we think that Rice and Miller, outwardly appearing as British White men, were actually acting more as how we might fantasise radical Black women to act? Do we think that the current identified leaders of Tavistock, outwardly appearing as a Black man and an Israeli woman, are acting like establishment British White men in sustaining an oppressive authority and leadership model?

Birth stories can enlighten and inspire. They can also confine and deaden. Both the United Kingdom and the outside group relations world have a Tavistock group relations history in the mind. Our fantasies about originators tend to have more to do with our needs and desires than the realities of who the originators were.

Current worldwide systemic dynamics

Covid

Gathering and travel restrictions in response to the Covid pandemic have had profound effects on group relations conferences and organisations. The effects are likely to continue after the immediate threat of the pandemic waned. The annual in-person conferences of many group relations organisations have moved online. There are benefits of online conferences. Online can attract new and younger audiences who would not be able to afford the expense of travel to in-person conferences. Online conferences can also more easily attract an international membership. What then is the future of in-person conferences? Well attended in-person conferences have typically supported the budgets of many group relations organisations. Will organisations lose revenue they had come to depend upon? How will the experience of online conferences differ from in-person? Will online conference experiences be a fractal of the wider world in which meta substitutes for authentic? During an online conference, when we click the "end meeting" button at the end of a large study group, get up from our chair, and walk to our kitchen, are we a fractal of the wider consumer culture who purchase goods and meals online and do not mingle with others in the store or dining room or restroom? What is lost in the group relations world that mirrors what we are losing in the wider world?

Economic models

Most group relations organisations are non-profit organisations. Historically they have often partnered with universities to host friendly, low-cost sites for public conferences. However, as neoliberal economic policies gain traction in many countries, universities increasingly operate from a business model rather than a service one. In the United States the value of higher education is increasingly measured by how much one can earn as compared to how much one can learn. This trend at universities has made it more

expensive to organise public conferences. If group relations is a fractal of the larger educational world, how will group relations organisations respond to these economic pressures? How can group relations serve social justice values, attract traditionally underserved members, and address reparation needs when facing pressures to survive economically?

Group relations work is embedded in the curriculum of some university departments. The Economics Department at Universidad De Chile, Teachers College at Columbia University, The School of Leadership at the University of San Diego, the Department of Psychosocial and Psychoanalytic Studies at Essex University, and Birkbeck University of London are examples. However, these conferences, whilst introducing group relations to students who often become leaders in the field, do not have a long reach into the public audience. The sustainability of conference work and its relevance to social problems may depend upon group relations organisations partnering more with other organisations. An example of this is the work of Grex, AKRI's West Coast Affiliate, partnering with the College of Pastoral Supervision and Psychotherapy (CPSP) to organise conferences for chaplains that have a strong application component. Obtaining grants and encouraging bequests are other ways to sustain organisational viability. Success of fund-raising efforts depends upon drawing the connection between group relations learning and its relevant application to social justice work, healthcare, government, and non-government organisation work.

Authoritarianism

Related to economics challenges is the question of how group relations react to and mirror the rise of authoritarianism in the world. In China, the surveillance state directly affects the development of group relations work. The identities of foreign staff hired for conferences are reviewed. Conference staff from Taiwan hired for staff positions on mainland China conferences are required to submit background information not required of mainland Chinese or other foreign staff. There are concerns that government spies will report to the Chinese Communist Party about conference events. Competition within leadership of the Chinese group relations community is connected to legitimacy issues around who is authorised by the Chinese Communist Party to work in China. In Russia, it is dangerous to refer to government authority during conference life. Self-censorship can also take form even in democratic countries whose governments do not criminalise free expression. We have all experienced, during a group relations conference, that there is something going on that cannot be spoken of. This is a universal and typically unconscious experience. However, this fear to acknowledge what is unspeakable is intensified in our current world. Threats of vigilante violence and the potential for social media ostracism are spreading. Given the polarisation and tribalism we observe in public discourse, there is a challenge to tolerate diversity of thought and political leanings in group relations conferences and communities.

Leadership

In my conversations in preparation for my talk and this article I was struck by the high levels of agitation and loneliness many of our group relations leaders endure to keep this work alive and relevant. I wonder how their experiences in leading our work mirror government dynamics in the wider world. Successful, national, democratically elected leaders in Scotland and New Zealand, women who were making progress in addressing their citizens' needs, recently resigned from office because of "the toll of the job" and "no longer having enough in the tank". At the same time authoritarian leaders, mostly men who promote narrow nationalism, subvert laws to stay in power. How is the group relations community working with our leaders? Are we becoming too dependent upon formally authorised leaders, pushing our unbearable feelings of dread, depression, and doubt upon them, and burning them out? Are we losing courage to bring our voice and passion to collective work?

Both Eric Miller (1985) and Chattopadhyay (2014) (Chattopadhyay & Malhotra, 1994) write about the individual's relationship to their organisations and what happens at the boundary between the individual and the organisation. They point to the costs to organisations when individuals abandon self-authorisation and hide behind the authority granted to formal leaders. Miller states and Chattopadhyay implies that we need to exercise our "bite" to have influence on changing the organisations in which we live. Bite means intentionality and self-authorisation. This suggests that the governance of group relations organisations might be best served by shared leadership models in order to avoid becoming a fractal of the burnout or authoritarianism leadership models we see internationally.

Collaborative learning

The thesis of this article is that group relations organisations and their conferences develop in unique ways as a function of the local environment in which they are rooted. If that is the case, organisations can learn something about their own house by knowing what is growing in their neighbour's yard. There are various ways and avenues for doing so. Il Nodo in Italy and OFEK in Israel are organising a Mediterranean conference that can be a model for collaborative learning between organisations. The Belgirate meetings have traditionally offered a venue for sharing diverse perspectives. The Organisation for Promoting Understanding of Society (OPUS) works to draw connections across continents. Partners in Confronting Collective Atrocities (PCCA) is multinational. Group Relations International (GRI) combines group relations work with spirituality and social justice and supports group relations communities worldwide. The recently formed Global Group Relations Forum, a bimonthly meeting of group relations organisation leaders which grew out of the 2018 Belgirate meetings, is another platform for systematic examination. The monthly AKRI international cohort meetings promote dialogue across international boundaries. This mix of established institutions, maturing

organisations, and fledgling groups invite dialogue across national boundaries to learn from each other.

Personal reflection

I feel privileged to have been asked to give the Eric Miller Memorial lecture. I've also felt exposed and vulnerable whilst doing so. Whilst I was formally authorised by OPUS to work on the task, I have been curious about how my identity as an American, White, male, straight, senior, native English-language speaker contribute to my unease.

A clue for me is the idea expressed by several group relations leaders that ancestors are just as present and relevant as childhood experiences in affecting our relationship with leadership and authority. Ten years ago I "accidentally" rediscovered group relations after a twenty-year hiatus when I travelled to Lithuania. I was motivated to travel there by my interest in learning more about my father. I wanted to understand my Lithuanian ancestors and their historical relationship with Lithuanian Jews. I was interested in how Lithuanians have taken roles of both perpetrators and victims. I also thought of AKRI's current work around reparations for the American legacy of White European settlers enslaving Black Africans. In both cases I felt my desire to connect personally to ancestral history and at the same time felt fear and shame which distanced me from knowing the experiences of ancestors and the other.

I felt trust and intimacy in my exchanges with others whilst working on this article. I felt a responsibility to those I spoke with that led me, at times, to question what task and who I was serving. Was I acting like an anthropologist studying foreign cultures for their benefit or exploiting other's trust to further my own ambitions? I also felt anxious knowing that my biases and ignorance were being exposed to others. I wrestled with how I could report my thinking authentically whilst at the same time defensively so as not to reveal my vulnerable blind spots. My experience may be a familiar leadership challenge for people identified with a dominant group, such as White, American men, to hold their authority and perspective and at the same time listen and learn from others. I am reporting my particulars. Others with an identity different to mine will feel vulnerable around the particulars of their own identity and others' projections upon them. I am interested in the perspective and experience of whoever goes next in conducting a survey like this.

During my conversations I sensed the love that many people feel for group relations work and for their group relations colleagues. I sensed that the people I spoke with were investing some trust in me as a vessel to carry hope. I feel their investment inside me. Whilst the reports and analyses I offer in this research article are speculative, the feelings of hope I gained are substantial. I can say as I conclude that my feelings of hope are stronger than the trepidation I felt around meaning making.

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Author comment: I don't have it. I've asked the person who should know. If I don't receive an answer in the next day or so I'd like to reference this in another way.

I got this link to work so have updated this reference more fully, OK?

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