

Group relations love: sentience and group relations work

PART I

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Abstract

Part I of this article will focus on the relationship between sentience and group relations conference work. Literature concerning group relations work and sentience will be explored. Sentience will be explored structurally and externally through the lens of task and group, with a focus on systems, organisational transformation, as well as the history, philosophy, and design of group relations conferences. Group relations work and sentience will also be focused on in relation to inquiry of why one does the work, embodying an internal perspective regarding the complexities of the consultant role and relationship to the group. The construct of group relations love will be introduced in connection with aspects of sentience in group work.

Keywords: group relations conference work, sentience, narratives, roles, people of colour.

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Margaret J. Rioch, "Why I work as a consultant in the conferences of the A. K. Rice Institute" (1985, p. 373)

... Love for mankind is the source of the group-taker's courage. Love of learning is the source of the group-taker's commitment. Love and wonder of being fully human is the source of the group-taker's competence. This work involves ...

Leroy Wells, Jr, "Consultants as nautical navigators: a metaphor for group-takers" (1998, p. 389)

INTRODUCTION

This article is about sentience as it relates to group relations conference (GRC) work. It will explore definitions of sentience as related to task and group, then move towards a focus on the experience of group work consultancy (e.g., why we do the work), and, an exploration of other aspects of the phenomenon (Lawrence, 2006; Miller & Rice 1967; Rioch, 1985;

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Short 2015; Smith, 1995; Wells, 1998). My inquiry of sentience is based on three questions: *What is the nature of sentience in group relations work?*; *What processes of meaning making are involved in the expression of sentience in group relations work?*; and *Why do individuals do group relations work?* A final inquiry will be focused on the processes of role integration in the member role after having had multiple staff roles at GRCs, and the efficacy of continuously taking up member roles as a way of deepening one's experiences of group relations work, personally and professionally.

This article has been written in two parts; the first part includes a literature review focusing on aspects of sentience and group relations work. The second part of the article will present the narrative responses to a questionnaire that I sent to colleagues about sentience and group relations work. Their narratives will be analysed and categorised into themes that will hopefully illuminate some of the meaning making processes regarding the three questions posed. Although this is not a formal research study, I will use some methods of the phenomenological approach to analyses by attempting to understand the essence of my colleagues' descriptions of their experiences of what Creswell and Poth (2018) describe as a lived phenomenon, in this case their experiences with group relations conference work. The next section will describe the methodology of this project.

METHODOLOGY

The document sent to each respondent included the following questions:

Questions for respondents

1. Describe your first group relations conference (GRC) member experience. Provide as much information as you feel comfortable concerning the GRC conference theme(s), geographic location, length of conference, why you went, what was memorable about the experience, and what you learnt.
2. Describe your most recent GRC member experience—respond to the same criteria as above.
3. What was it like for you to be in a formal member role (one or more times) at a GRC after having been in administrative/consultant/director roles? What was challenging? What was fun/enjoyable?
4. What is your relationship with/to group relations work? If you can, please use a descriptive metaphor in your answer that captures/symbolises your relationship with/to the work.
5. Do you believe it's helpful/important for individuals to continue to have formal member experiences in GRC's—after having been in administrative/consultant/director roles? Please explain your answer.
6. What is the connection for you, between group relations and love?

There were eight respondents to the questionnaire; each respondent had a variety of GRC experience in member and multiple staff roles. With one exception, I know the respondents as colleagues that I have been on consultant staff with, and/or director of, at GRCs over the years and I have friendships with several of them. A few respondents also attended a presentation I made about this topic at the AKRI Dialogues 2 symposium in May of 2015. They are all people of colour and ranged, at the time this article was being written, from thirty-nine to sixty years of age. Each respondent was asked to self-identify their races, ethnicities, and nationalities, which were: Human, African-Caribbean, Black and British; South Asian, USA and Indian; African, Coloured and South African; Haitian African American; Asian, Southeast Asian and South Asian, Philippine and US; African American and US; Black American, and, Asian/Asian American, Straits Chinese, Singaporean. Although information about gender was not requested, I identified the respondents as being composed of six women and two men. The range of years of experience in group relations work, based upon their first GRC experience, was ten to twenty-three years. Each respondent agreed to complete and return a questionnaire sent to them via email attachment and subsequently agreed in writing to allow me to use their narratives. It is interesting to note that although I also sent the questionnaire to a racially diverse cohort of colleagues, all of the respondents were people of colour. I will comment about this dynamic briefly, later in the article.

The processes of phenomenological analyses I have employed for this article are from the transcendental or psychological phenomenology approach. The procedures consist of: 1) identifying the phenomenon to study, which is sentience and group relations work; 2) bracketing out the author's experiences; 3) collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, which was done via a questionnaire; 4) analysing the data, which in this article are the respondents' answers to the questionnaire; 5) reducing the data into significant statements or quotes; and 6) combining the statements or quotes into clusters of themes (Moustakas 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). After this process I will develop textural and structural descriptions of the respondents' experiences based on the theme clusters.

Analyses of the themes developed from the data will hopefully be able to provide the reader with a clearer understanding of the respondents' lived experiences of the phenomenon (e.g., that a single unifying experience of the phenomenon exists and what it is like for someone to experience that phenomenon) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to the above phenomenological procedures, a discussion and recommendations for continued exploration of sentience and group relations work will be provided.

The next section will focus on bracketing my lived experience of sentience and group relations work.

THE AUTHOR'S LIVED EXPERIENCE

Bracketing, often conducted in phenomenological research, is a methodology in which the researcher or investigator sets aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination. This is done by including descriptions of their own experiences with the phenomenon and bracketing out their views before proceeding to document the experiences of others (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990, 2014, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a counselling psychologist who has been engaged in group relations work at GRCs for many years, as well as a university professor who teaches a graduate level group work course, I feel it is important for me to acknowledge my processes of reflection about group relations work and sentience for this article.

In May 2015, I presented a working paper at the A. K. Rice (AKRI) Dialogues 2 symposium in Chicago, Illinois, entitled, “Group relations love ... finding, freeing and authorizing my member role(s)”. The origins of this presentation were from a talk I had given at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (TIHR) in London, for their “Food for thought lunchtime talk”, exactly two years before in May 2013. The talk, entitled “Reflections on membership at the leadership for transformation in the self, groups and systems group relations conference”, was about my experiences as a member at a GRC in Bengaluru, India, in January of the same year (Short, 2013).

At the TIHR talk I focused on the challenges I had experienced in fully taking up my member role after having been on consultant staff for many years and directing two conferences in the US. I spoke about my experiences of being a member at a GRC in India as a woman of colour; I also reflected upon the experience of having membership in a conference that was completely staffed by Indian consultants and administrators and directed by an Indian woman. The membership of this conference, with the exception of three members, two of whom were white European women and myself an African-American woman, was also Indian with much diversity in terms of their intersectionality. This was for me a first-time experience of engaging with a staff composed entirely of brown people and a membership of similar demographic composition. There was also the experience of my nationality as an American being more salient than my race; an experience that I also had at group relations conferences in Paris, France; Scotland; and Leicester, UK. This was quite different from my experiences in the US, where my race is often much more salient than my nationality or other aspects of my identity. A final focus of the TIHR talk was a discussion with colleagues about their own experiences with member role challenges at conferences, which was very interesting.

After the talk I decided to submit a proposal to present the paper at the AKRI Dialogues 2 symposium. My proposal was accepted and as I

prepared the presentation it became clear to me that what had simply been reflections of a group relations experience had coalesced into the beginning of a paper about integrating the complexities of the conference in the mind when taking up a member role after having taken consultant and administrative roles. I also found myself reflecting about the nature of sentience in group relations work; sentience in this case being defined as emotional reactions and connections to the work (e.g., the complexities of love and hatred of the work and the learning gained from those emotions—what I identified as group relations love). And, I reflected on the collegial/personal relationships we have with members of staff and/or within the membership of a conference (Bion, 1962, as cited in Jacobus, 2005; Rioch, 1985; Short, 2015).

In preparing for the presentation I discovered a book by Mary Jacobus (2005) that included a chapter on Bion entitled, “Palinurus and the tank: *Bion’s war*”. In the chapter Jacobus explored the theories of Bion’s *Learning from Experience*, in which he wrote about his memories from World War I (I believe they were also traumas); the idea of containing and containment and the use of the terms external and internal objects.

Jacobus also described, in a second chapter about Bion, the “Bionic relational triad of love or hate or knowledge (LHK)”, which he equated with representation and transformation in relation to psychoanalysis, but which I believe can also be a template for the love or hatred of knowledge. Moreover, in relation to the Kleinian construct of projective identification, which Bion understood as a “primitive form of linking”, and “a potentially destructive form of unlinking”, he developed $-K$, defined as a negative form of thought characterised by destruction of knowledge “or the link constituted by NOT understanding[,] i.e., *misunderstanding*” which I feel also connects with one’s ambivalent relationship to learning and knowledge (Bion, 1962, as cited in Jacobus, 2005, p. 175).

This spoke to my struggles as a member at the conference in Bengaluru, India, and in my life with loving and hating my knowledge of group life as viewed through my group relations lens. In my presentation I also spoke of struggling with my processes of integration and knowledge; in other words, where to “put” my existing knowledge (e.g., the search for a good enough container) in order to create room for new learning, which might lead to transformative meaning making and new knowledge.

Finally, it has always been important to me, since I began teaching and writing about group relations, to be transparent about the cultural contexts of the theories and group work (McRae & Short, 2010; McRae et al., 2007; Short, 2007, 2016; Short & Williams, 2014). In order to do this, due to the lack of acknowledgement in the literature of the cultural context of group relations theory and work (e.g., that it is Eurocentric, Western, and monocultural), I have often found it necessary to go outside of group relations theories and psychoanalytic, open systems theories. For this presentation, I wished to read theories about love as they are

related to culture. To that end I revisited the writings of the cultural critic and feminist bell hooks (2000), who, in her book *All About Love: New Visions*, wrote about love and: (1) social justice work; and (2) gender; observing that men writing about having received love is equated with their authority on love, and women writing about not having received longed-for love is often equated as being from a position of lack. hooks also stated that a focus on lovelessness is much more common than a focus on love.

So, in the presentation I spoke about Bion, a white, male British psychiatrist, whose theories of group life were created in part based on traumatic experiences of war and a search for appropriate models and containers for the anxieties of annihilation that came from memories of those experiences. This connects for me with the group relations model's emphasis on anxiety which can be closely associated with relived/re-remembered trauma. And, I spoke about hooks, a black American woman who is a feminist and cultural critic, who writes about the absence of love being easier to access and discuss than its presence and meaning in our lives. This connects for me with the group relations model and its emphasis on deprivation and dependence and the relationship between these two states of being.

I also realised that my earlier curiosity concerning my colleagues' experiences about these dynamics had become more intense and I decided to create a series of questions to send to a few of them about their experiences with group relations conference work. Three colleagues were kind enough to indulge me and completed the questionnaire, and along with my working paper, their responses were presented at the AKRI Dialogues 2 symposium. The responses of those three colleagues are included among the eight respondents' narratives in Part II of this article.

The response to the presentation was quite positive, despite my fears of not being taken seriously or being misunderstood regarding my themes (e.g., group relations and love is not often discussed or written about), and this moved me towards a decision to write this article about sentience in group relations work.

The next two sections will focus on group relations literature concerning sentience in relation to task and group and consultancy.

SENTIENCE AND GROUP RELATIONS WORK: TASK AND GROUP

In group relations literature, sentience was written about by Miller and Rice (1967) as it relates to task and sentient systems. The authors made distinctions between task systems and sentient systems that are bounded by society. According to Miller and Rice, a sentient system or group is one that "demands and receives loyalty from its members" (p. 259). They also stated that:

"An effective sentient system relates members of an enterprise to each other and to the enterprise in ways that are relevant to the skills and experience required for the task performance"; it also provides its members with some defense against anxiety. (Miller & Rice, 1967, p. 259)

Thus, sentient systems can be professional groups that individuals belong and feel committed to, and by which they receive support; membership to these groups allows them to practice in their chosen professions. The authors cite the following analogy to illustrate this view:

... In the theater the task group is the cast and other staff assembled for a play. While the play is running, task group and sentient group are, or should be, coincident; but actors have "the profession" as their superordinate sentient group, to which they can commit themselves whether acting or "resting." Without the profession and the regard in which it is held, both by its members and the public, it is doubtful if the theater could survive. (Miller & Rice, 1967, p. 261)

What is interesting about this example is the focus on sentience as it relates to the actors' profession (e.g., "their superordinate sentient group"), which supports their identities as actors whether they are acting or "resting". The sentient tie to their profession seems to be the foundation of theatre. I believe this example could be applied to group relations work regarding the impact of sentience and professional identity, for example, the superordinate sentience of the work. GRC staff members may have sentient ties with the work whether they are working at a conference or not.

In keeping with Miller and Rice's (1967) perspective of sentience, contemporary group relations literature has focused on it in relation to an examination of the history of the American organisation that supports group relations work, The A. K. Rice Institute for the Study of Social Systems (AKRI) and its challenges with organisational change and transformation from a club, with a mission of membership to an organisation focused on membership and education, and later solely on education (Noumair et al., 2010). Gertler and Izod (2004) offered their hypothesis of the "confusion of tongues" of postmodernism and modernism in group relations. The authors identify a "modern and postmodern paradigmatic mismatch" that has resulted in gaps between staff and members' comprehension of organisational and psychological phenomena in group relations conferences (p. 81). Gertler and Hayden (2015) focused on the history of group relations conferences in the US and how the "cultural, economic, and social history of the country" influenced American group relations since its inception in 1965 (p. 141). They postulated that group relations conferences in the US have, following the "trajectory" of academic disciplines, moved "away from an engagement with the *social*" (e.g., learning about organisational structure) and "more toward engagement of the *personal and individual*" (p. 142). This perspective is particularly salient regarding the focus of this article. Finally, Khaleelee

and White (2014) took a global view of group relations, focusing on global development, innovation of the work and the connections between group relations conference design in different countries, and societal changes, through their interviews with forty-nine conference directors in seventeen countries.

In each of these perspectives, there is a focus on sentience that bears some relation to the task and sentient systemic hypotheses of Miller and Rice (1967). There is also, in these perspectives, a dichotomised dynamic of tension between task and modes of existence. For example, there is an inquiry into the historical tensions between organisational change and transformation that Noumair et al. (2010) document. There is the mismatch of modernism and postmodernism in group relations work (Gertler and Izod, 2004); similar challenges exist in the progression of group relations conferences from their focus on the social to the individual that Gertler and Hayden (2015) identify; and, finally, the tension that can exist between tradition and innovation and the influences of world events in the design of group relations conferences in globalised contexts that Khaleelee and White (2014) explore in their work.

Another exploration of group relations work that does not involve a dichotomised perspective but evokes sentience is that of the social dreaming matrix and the implementation of it in group relations conferences. Lawrence (2006) describes the social dreaming matrix (SDM) as first being held at the Tavistock Institute in 1982. The matrix is described as starting “from the unconscious dream life of the participants, moving to consciousness, and not, as in Bion groups, moving from consciousness to the unconscious”. In SDM members and staff join to publicly share their dreams, which are “the property” of the matrix (pp. 15–16). Following Miller and Rice’s (1967) lead, Lawrence identifies sentience and task in his first working hypothesis of the SDM:

The first working hypothesis is that dream arises from a matrix of emotional experience and thinking that are embedded in primordial experience retained in the unconscious. Matrix is perennial, while group is transitory, governed by ties of task and sentience. The unconscious of the dreaming is the currency of a matrix. Ideally, the dream would speak of and with other dreams. Dreaming is grounded in the matrix of the undifferentiated unconscious, i.e., proto-mental thinking prior to any rational thinking. (Lawrence, 2006, p. 16)

Lawrence’s description of SDM and the differences between the perennial nature of the matrix and the transitory properties of group in relation to ties of task and sentience connects with Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. In his description of the collective unconscious, Jung defined it as “a complex, universal, and primordial set of psychic images that are common to all humanity”. Jung identified these universal images as archetypes that were “transmitted biologically across generations and cultures in the form of memory traces”, ostensibly located in the cortex of the brain (Jung, 1960, as cited in Ivey et al., 2012,

p. 238). Although the collective unconscious has not been proven to be empirically valid, particularly in biological contexts, contemporary multicultural theories of psychology have linked it with the family and the collective cultural unconscious (e.g., familial experiences that are transmitted during childhood become a part of the adolescent's and adult's intersectional identities) (Ivey et al., 2012). Thus, this contemporary interpretation of Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and its relationship to Lawrence's hypotheses of the SDM seems to bring the construct of sentience to new levels regarding the salience of making meaning of the impact of group relations work.

SENTIENCE IN GROUP RELATIONS WORK: WHY WE DO THE WORK

Although the literature about group relations has traditionally focused on sentience as it is related to task and the group, there has been limited literature about group relations work and sentience related to *why* we do the work and what meaning it has for those of us who continuously engage in it. Rioch (1985), in her chapter, "Why I work as a consultant in the conferences of the A. K. Rice Institute", cites a focus on the relationship of person to role and exploration of the question, "Why do I do this work at all?" to be of paramount importance (p. 365). Rioch elaborates on the complexities of person–role, which she identifies as starting "at the very beginning of life, probably in the womb if the truth were known", and she suggests that, "the most potent aspect of the role–person dichotomy is often the picture one has as a person of one's role" (pp. 366, 368). In her quest to uncover what assuming the consultant role does to individuals, she first hypothesises that working in this role with other consultants promotes the development of deep friendship and good companionship that one rarely finds elsewhere. She then posits that taking up the consultant role assists individuals in becoming more courageous, and finally, the proactive nature of the role (e.g., the consultant's interpretations guide the group), engenders an awareness of the potential to live more fully in the present.

Rioch's (1985) contention is that the "deepest secret and the deepest reason" why we engage in group relations consultancy work is "mystical and spiritual", and that "consultants have a secret power that they can exercise while at the same time denying it" (p. 372). She goes on to state:

It is perhaps only in death that one finds complete merging of the self with the other or others, but conferences give brief moments of insight into what that might be like, when the I of the consultant is really the same as the entity called the group. ... Occasionally I have been moved myself to say that I am the group and the group is me. Sometimes I have known that I went down into a deep tunnel like death and the reward was deeper and greater communication between me and the group. (Rioch, 1985, p. 373)

It is Rioch's hypotheses about the impact that group relations consultancy work has on those who do it within GRCs and elsewhere, as well as the acknowledgment of what can be at times the unspeakable, mystical, spiritual, and softer aspects of the work that seems to me to be most connected to sentience. It is still a form of sentience tied to task and group on one level, but on the other, intricately bound to meaning making processes of connectedness to colleagues who do group relations work, as well as to the groups that one consults to.

A final aspect of Rioch's (1985) article was what she described as "a kind of fairy tale", the story of Marius, which she used to illuminate her reflections within the article. The story of Marius involved a plot that focused on exploration of the depths of the sea, danger, fear, heroism, love, and finally, transformation. Rioch likened the story to the consultant and the mysteriousness of studying the nature of authority in groups within oneself (pp. 374, 381).

However, Rioch's (1985) parable of Marius has, for me, less resonance than her suggestion that the consultant's role has a "secret power", that is exercised while simultaneously being denied, as well as her conviction about the deeper reasons why we engage in group work—the mystical and spiritual aspects of it. It is also intriguing that she likens aspects of the consultant's work to contain both feminine and masculine projections. Rioch uses the outdated term "hermaphroditic" to describe this phenomenon; I use the more contemporary term "gender fluidity", (e.g., a form of androgyny), to describe some of the gendered projections that consultants may receive. She also uses the term "Zen master" to describe the role, likening it to that of a psychotherapist in Western contexts (pp. 371–372).

Kenwyn K. Smith (1995) in his chapter, "On using the self as instrument: lessons from a facilitator's experience", captured some of Rioch's (1985) reflections on the relationship of person to role, in particular her focus on the sentience between the consultant and the group. He focuses on the importance of the facilitator's learning to use the self as an instrument, and identifies the ability to "be intensely connected to the experience of the group and simultaneously separated from them", to be "a skill that provides the foundation of a very difficult, but necessary task: *comprehending the whole of interaction patterns that one is a part of*" (p. 277). He identifies the use of the facilitator's self as a transferential object via one's emotions, thoughts, and personhood that allows one to "tune into processes occurring in the group not yet accessible through direct observation" (p. 278). It is this identification of the facilitator as the transferential object that seems to connect most closely with Rioch's hypothesis that the "I of the consultant is really the same as the entity called the group", and, that feeling of being moved to say that "I am the group and the group is me" (p. 373).

More than a decade after Rioch's (1985) writings, Leroy Wells Jr (1998) wrote about the role of the consultant in his unfinished article,

"Consultants as nautical navigators: a metaphor for group-takers". Wells uses a sailing analogy to describe the role and task of the consultant. Like Rioch, water, in the form of the high seas, is the foundation for the imagery presented, and consultancy is viewed as a journey or voyage of discovery that brings "together thought and experience, emotion and intellect, body and spirit, without neglecting one for the other" (Rioch, 1970, as cited in Wells, 1998, p. 380). Wells cites the use of the term *group-taker* as the Kleinian term for what is now called a consultant, as a reminder to completely take in the condition of the group before making interpretations. In his nautical metaphor of consultant as navigator, Wells cites vision, hearing, heart, the senses of touch, olfactory, and taste to be important components of consultancy. The component of "heart" is of particular interest as Wells describes it:

The consultant must understand the heart of the group (i.e., the core of the group's experience), take the group to heart (i.e., give undivided attention to the group), possess heart, (i.e., have the courage to steadfastly work to understand the group), and carry the group in his or her heart (i.e., constantly keep the group as a beloved object). (Wells, 1998, p. 383)

Keeping the group as a "beloved object", I believe requires, as Wells suggests, having an open heart and that openness in group relations work is related to sentience, not only of task but also of being.

Wells' (1998) article remains unfinished due to his untimely death, and another, very salient aspect of his work are the strong sentient ties that others had to him as a colleague, mentor, leader, and visionary in group relations work. And, Wells, regarding his concluding paragraph, also seemed to connect consultancy and group relations work to love:

... Working with groups is based on the ancient Greek concept of agape. Love for mankind is the source of the group-taker's courage. Love of learning is the source of the group-taker's commitment. Love and wonder of being fully human is the source of the group-taker's competence. This work involves (Wells, 1998, p. 389)

Kenwyn K. Smith, who worked on the document after Wells' death made the decision to leave the quote and article unfinished. In a personal note at the end of the article Smith likened Wells' work to an unfinished symphony, citing Wells as a "beloved colleague", and expressing a longing "to know how Leroy would have drawn this to a conclusion and where he might have taken us next". He further states that leaving the final section unfinished was "a stark reminder of a loved one taken too soon from our midst but whose brilliance and compassion shines bright in the night sky and offers guidance to all seeking to cross troublesome waters" (Smith, 1995, pp. 389-390).

Smith's heartfelt comments about Wells reminds us that there is, of course, a long history in group relations work of, as Rioch (1985) states, "deep friendship and good companionship" among consultants, and

there are also generational mentor and mentee connections that run quite deeply throughout the work (p. 370). Moreover, enactments of harmonious and adversarial pairings, broken alliances, intense feelings of sexual attraction, envy, shame, competition, jealousy, longing, abandonment, and betrayal are also quite common in group work. These complex experiences are sentient, and all are ostensibly open to exploration in group relations consultancy work.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature presented concerning sentience and group relations work in this article, it seems that there have been both external and internal explorations of the phenomenon by practitioners of the work. In the first instance sentience, as it relates to group relations work, has been explored structurally (e.g., externally) through the lens of task and group, which encompasses a focus on systems, organisational transformation, as well as the history, philosophy, and design of conference work. Group relations work as it relates to sentience has also been focused on via inquiry of why one does the work, which embodies an internal perspective concerning the complexities of the consultant role and the consultant's relationship to the group.

The next part of this article will seek to continue these interesting explorations in a different way—by presentation and analyses of narratives that reflect the complexities of sentience and group relations and the processes of making meaning of lived experiences of the work.

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