

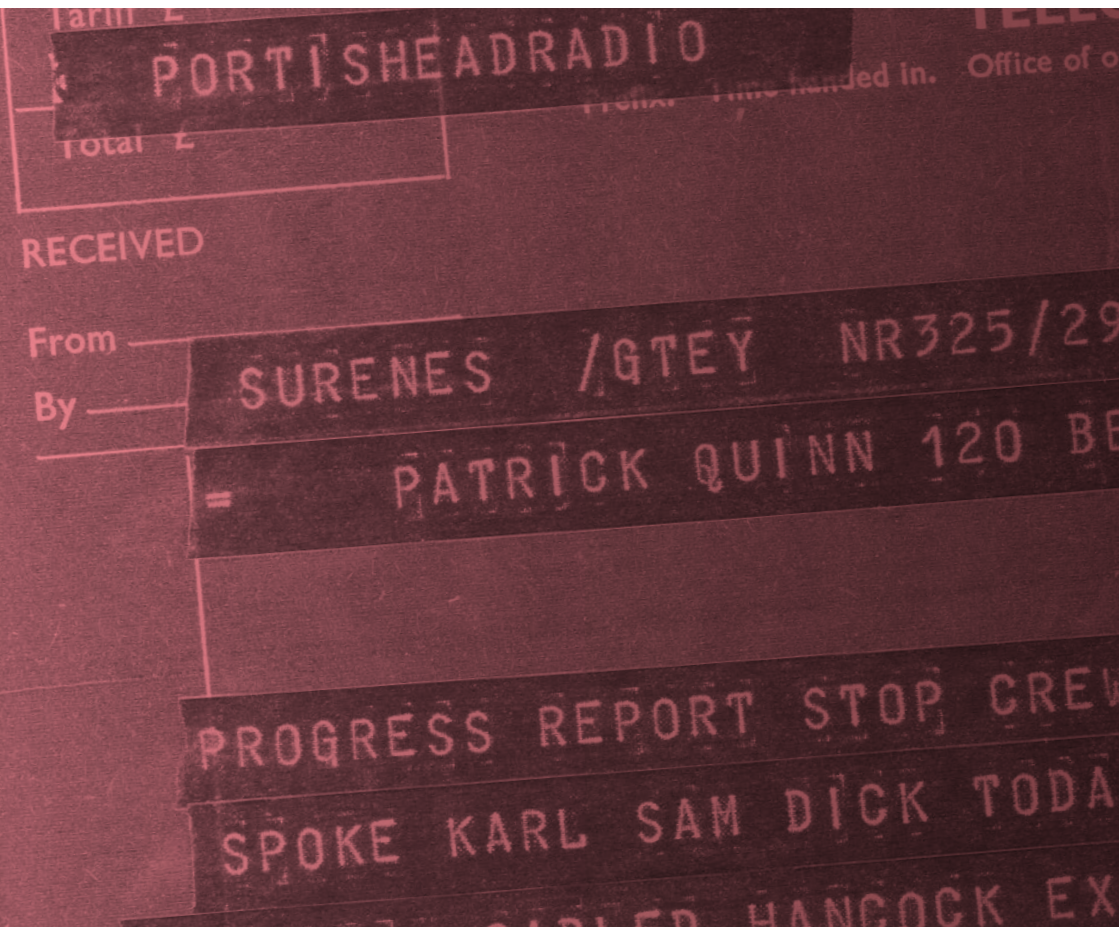
The Experience of Being Seventy or Older

A Tavistock Group Relations Event – GR70

MANNIE SHER, PHD

Principal Consultant/Researcher

The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations



Copyright ©2018 Tavistock Institute of Human Relations All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

ISBN-978-1-9999479-2-7

Birth of an Idea: 70 for the Tavistock; 70 for people

One morning over coffee with Leonie, my wife, and wondering what contribution to make to the Tavistock Institute's upcoming 70th anniversary festival, she casually asked 'why don't you run a group relations conference for people of 70 or over?' We are both over 70 ourselves and quite preoccupied by it and by the associated problems of ageing like health, finances and a general sense of time being finite. We knew our friends to be similarly pre-occupied; some of them were ill and some had died. And so the idea was born – I would offer the Festival an event that would mark 70 for individual people as the Festival would mark 70 years of the Tavistock Institute and it would take the form of a group relations event, not a conference, so that the experience of being 70 or over would be differentiated from traditional group relations conferences themes around authority, role and leadership. Staff would be invited who were themselves 70 or over, thus making participant and staff roles distinctive and not their age. In other words, the staff's experience of being 70 or over would be up for discussion too – there would less of an 'us-and-them' feeling in the event.

Recruitment happened and 32 people took part in an event that naturally turned out to have painful and depressing resonances for people. To our amazement, the event also drew out people's delight at the discovery of renewed energy expressing a cheerful enjoyment of life and an exultation of spirit. Participants found there could be a "joy of conversation, joy of eating, joy of anything one might do, a comprehensive joy and a philosophy of life that involves one's whole being" (Shibles, 1997) and a "spontaneous relaxed enjoyment, a primitive *joie de vivre*" (Rogers, 1961).

Transitioning: From Being in Roles to 'not wanted'

The opening of the event was characterised by an expectation that ageing is a part of life's journey that is fraught with difficulty. The participants described their sense of **lack of visibility** that comes with ageing; of 'not being seen' in public places. Lack of visibility and associated lack of influence, was especially painful after a lifetime of having significant work and professional roles. On the other hand, being older also had its perks, like being offered a seat on public transport. But overall, as one got older, the opinion was one of an increased sense of vulnerability in an unsafe world.

Ageing was also a time of **reversed oedipal relationships** in which things are given up, like letting one's children be parents in their own right, instead of continuing with the struggles of younger years about holding on to one's place and not standing aside. However, older people still have a desire to contribute to the family and to society, but now they find the role is not automatic; it has to be negotiated afresh. Still in our memories are our parents who had jobs for life, while today we would regard ourselves lucky if we could remain in work beyond 60 and still be a contributor. On the other hand, many wondered how we could contribute to a world that had changed so much. We recognise that our children live in a different world to ours – they know what they need to know, but we have to learn things all over again. It would be easier to keep going, it was felt, if ageing was honoured as it is in certain ethnic societies that respect older people, but in our society there is something wounding about being old – loss of productivity and regarded as waste. Our generation had to look after our parents; now we are anxious about being looked after ourselves.

It is often assumed that oedipal struggles are 'done' within early childhood, but they re-appear in later life – in adolescence, where the young person has to deal with issues of life and death, of time, of generations, of one's place in the generational hierarchy; and oedipal conflicts emerge in older age as the generation issues come to the fore again, reinforced by envy of the young for having vitality and a longer future to enjoy it. Time becomes important once more, as a commodity that is running out. Issues about succession become crucial and open new arenas for conflict: do we stand aside, or do we hold on to our positions in our lives, our families and our careers? And how do we do that while still supporting those who come after us, or who are now alongside or ahead of us? Do we move back and allow the younger ones to lead? How do we manage this without giving up altogether? What is a resigned, sad acceptance, a thankful acceptance, or a creative difference in taking up our roles?

One of the most important tasks of this time of life is managing resurging oedipal feelings. There is no right answer, everyone finds (or not) their own solutions, but it requires emotional work to find, even temporarily, our own solution to these issues. One can resolve oedipal situations with equanimity; the alternative is bitterness, envy and regret that could end up harming relationships with one's adult children.

Participants placed much **importance on work**. Was it ever thus, or were we seeing a new phenomenon of the baby boom generation, who need to keep working to facilitate their pensions? Or are we an older, sterner generation moralising to the younger to

keep working to support the public health and care services for an ageing population in greater need than ever before? Where do older people locate themselves in their working lives? Does it change over time or do we try holding on to what was before? In the Life Stories part of the programme, many stories involved changes of profession over the years, developing new areas of interest, responding to changed circumstances. Success in an older age seemed to relate to a capacity to adjust, to seek out the new, to make something of what comes along.



Pops at Christmas

Discussions on the challenges of making the literal journey to this Tavistock GR70 event reflected the challenges of the journey of life and its **associated anxieties** about ageing, the loss of autonomy, being vulnerable and needing to be looked after, especially when having no family. Ageing requires finding a new language that would include social concerns and responsibilities towards increasing numbers of older people in society. Anxieties were partly connected to feelings of vulnerability and dependency of being an old person; these anxieties were evident in the here-and-now processes of the large group where discussion widened to the experience of ageing at home and in society and in the event itself. People had many more individual needs now and they are disappointed to find they are not recognised even here in the event – 'it seems just like the same old remembered group relations conferences: is the leadership here able to cater for my individual needs? Who is in charge?'

During GR70 several metaphors of ageing were produced – **the dependency/independent dynamic** being a central one – for example, the idea of the young being free and joyful and the old being like old wine associated with experience and wisdom. Nevertheless, positive pictures competed with rising concerns about the future – how will I be? The participants told stories of when they were children looking after their parents who had gone through WWII or were affected by the Holocaust. They recalled their adolescence which framed their struggles around adolescent dependency and independence because of the special role they had in compensating for their parents' suffering. Similarly, in the GR70 event, there was back and forth movement between here-and-now experiences and there-and-then memories and feelings, evoking a tension between 'using the incredible opportunities to be ourselves' and being locked into 'homage to parents who sacrificed for us'.

Participants were clear that the **'physicality of ageing', that 'looking after our bodies'**, is a priority, but not the only one. There are profound relational aspects to ageing – children and grandchildren do not want us to age, and other people for whom we are important, like patients, partners, friends and colleagues who have developed dependencies on us. Fear of sudden death ('we may be dead by Friday', said a participant) affects our behaviour towards those close to us whom we want to protect from loss and tears, and towards our bodies that we want to preserve physically and psychologically. Appearance has become a source of anxiety with ageing. Partners, children, and pets were mentioned. Little was said about the death of the participants' own parents, as presumably this concern would have passed to us, the newest generation facing death. A few still had living parents requiring care. Some discussed the illness and death of partners and this was hugely important. However, most people were more concerned about how they might go on, than with looking back at partners who had died. Survivors and continuing to survive was the dominant issue.

Two languages for ageing emerged – the individual/personal and the social – and often they are mutually exclusive. Can people integrate the two languages? Must a new language be developed in order to understand the experience of ageing and society's reaction to it? The language of loss and grief is not the language of productivity and purposefulness; something new has to be found to link them. Not having the language makes one feel under-confident and lost. Speaking of people who have died is a reminder of the immanence of death of oneself and it is sad, but there is an urge to find a new language, a physical dimension of the body and movement, rather than prolonged

constricting sitting. Life has moved on, and in the moving on, one has to face atrophy, restriction and the loss of relationships, decline and pain and the limitations of old age. But new groups and relationships, roles and experiences start to form in the event, each holding something different. Energy and life opportunities start emerging as participants actualise their dependency on others. Sailing metaphors are offered – 'being under way, starting the engine'; slowing down, but still striving to get in and facing up to being competitive; not being content with being part of the out-group or working less. There can be a way of being old and managing competing states of health and energy and illness. Feelings of vitality and sexuality and feelings of not being attractive are present and spoken about reluctantly. People discover a natural sense of emotional aliveness, making us feel alive by speaking about that is repressed – can older people still engage joyfully in sexiness, music and fun?

Grandparents and grandchildren provide a sharpened sense of continuity and they both engage in understanding the **dynamics of the generations**; each generation offers the other a keen perspective of life; the young offer the old a new lease of life. In contrast, older people meeting a new person for the first time raises awareness that new relationships will almost certainly not last as long as former ones – 'memories are littered with corpses of former contemporaries'. Making new connections is difficult. The freedom of adolescence is long buried; ageing is characterised by numerous endings and beginnings, coupled with renewed anxiety of becoming dependent. Recent caring for parents may serve as a warning of what's to come, while recovering from illness may make one feel more alive. Living on the edge can animate one. Starting a new life can be filled with excitement; it may also express envy of the young. Occasional experiences of real friendship, of falling in love, can give one hope; and divorce or death, losing the challenge of remaining alive for others, may mean losing a big part of one's life.

Life Alone or with Groups: the ignominy of one; the power of many

Ageing alone or with others and the role of groups was said to be a critical question in the cycle of ageing – the tension between holding on and letting go. Being part of and not being part of groups is associated with being able to keep one's individuality, the striving for which may be compromised by the irritations of group membership as people rub up against each other. But groups also provide opportunities for growth and the necessary empathy. Individual feelings of privacy may be compromised but the group experience of solidarity can help people move on. People remember feelings and experiences of past groups, making new friendships but also struggling to find a voice in groups, grappling with the sense of the absurd; learning to be being present and immediate, being impatient as time rushes by, our drive and our reluctance to discover new things being challenged for fear of failed expectations. In groups people discover vital individual differences and also find comfort in sameness. Individual differences raise anxiety, but can also be interesting. Membership of groups means dealing with disappointment – the effort of attending; questioning what one is getting and the anger directed at the organisers for uncovering the layers of repressed feeling about ageing. But there are also dreams of repeating the old, of finding something new and friendship. People are moved by hearing that making new friends is possible in the time that is left. Group discussion helps to place the pressures 'to be old' in perspective – our children; the person who offers us their seat on the tube; our bodies; our minds; a society that emphasises retirement, pensions, age. People speak of groups helping people develop a combination of processes of dying and processes of living at the same time. Groups better illuminate the competition and striving for balance and integration because inherent annihilation anxiety also serves to trigger affirmation of life.

A **fall** is described – a female participant on the tube on her way to the event, falls and she fears a possible broken leg or hip. Falling down acts as a reminder of childhood and having a mother to help us up. Now, as an older person who falls, we do not have mothers to help us up and we have to rely on strangers – two white Englishmen helped on the tube. The fall was serious and there is fear of consequences – 'what have I done to myself? I felt vulnerable and shaken'. Living beyond the age of a parent raises feelings of terror of falling, making one anxious and vulnerable. There is also resentment about the anxiety of being vulnerable – it goes with the territory – can old remedies work, like getting back on the horse, feeling alive, regenerating vitality and looking for humour and joy? 'Falling' is associated with 'falling into dementia' and anxiety about death – who is going to die first? The idea of death, of facing a void, is far more threatening. Can death really be accepted? A feature of language as one ages is the excruciating loss of words; or shouting without realizing it. Difficulties of hearing one another in the event remind of an increasing state of disability. As one ages, there is a changing balance between taking care of ourselves and continuing to do things that give pleasure.

In the event, the **identity of 'old'** is submerged; instead other aspects of identity emerge to provide a sense of difference – being foreign, being adequate, being disabled, being of colour, men who speak in a lower register and make it difficult for females to hear.

Cultural identity provides relief from the identity of 'old' – a young black female offers her seat on the underground. Black and Asian people represent a different and impressive social reality of younger people showing respect towards older people.

Memories of the 'Tavistock' are recalled from a dream about bringing Mojo, a feisty tabby cat (heard as Tavi cat) to the event or leaving him at home that introduces thoughts about the Tavistock and its meaning for people. Since the majority of participants have had previous relationships with one of the Tavistock institutions, feelings are inevitable – can one let go of the Tavi and have our own experiences here? Gratitude towards the Tavistock is strong because its ideas informed one's outlook on the world. And there are attacks on the Tavistock too – for not being as it was remembered years ago – expressed as disappointment that this is not a real 'group relations conference'. Discovering that the Tavistock has changed makes it clear the future belongs to the younger generation and the older do not have priority. People are reassured though by the efforts of the Tavistock in caring about the past and the future through the archive and the festival. Thinking about the future introduces sex and ideas about risk-taking, being fierce like Mojo and having the energy to get what one wants.



Aunt Jane, Birthday Fireworks

The creative self in the company of others results in creativity compounded

Competition and envy are alive and well in the event. Images of young people, colours, gardens, privilege and the anger of the deprived, the outsider, good fortune, working hard from nothing to get where I am, introduces competition of who is who in the hierarchy of the event, who is healthier; who has done better in life; and who is smarter. Competition, anger and envy are part of the experience of ageing especially in relation to young people. Everyone became very lively on the generative possibilities of competition, jealousy and envy. They provide a liveliness and a reason to keep going, even if only to try to defeat the other. Do we need competition as we age? Often we remove ourselves from it, but do we really let it go? It seemed easy to evoke it – in the event the main expression of competition was left to foreign participants. For older people, the joys of life reduce down to relationships with partners, with worrying thoughts in the background, often not spoken about, of death and loss. 'If I lost her, I would feel suicidal. She is somebody who always receives me.' People who had lost partners or family in the Holocaust talk about their sadness and their regrets that they had not talked about death together beforehand. They talk about having to mourn and let go and adapt and develop a resilience to cope with whatever happens.



Musings in 'Bed'

Relationships with the Tavistock renewed – acknowledging the changes in it and in ourselves

There was intense discussion about the 'big' personalities of the Tavistock from the past who had served as **containers for projection** of one's wishes and hopes. 'After the Fall' is a reference to leaving the material world and entering a space of boundarylessness in which there is nothing to hold on to. In Milton's Paradise Lost, the battle between Satan and his followers and Angels of Heaven lies in competition around who can speak and who cannot; of who is remembered and who not. Some in the event speak of a place for Harold Bridger, 'a wonderful nice old man', but there is mixture of competing affiliations with other figures from the past, like A. K. Rice and Eric Miller. One can feel homeless even in a homely environment like the Tavistock that sometimes accentuates feelings of loneliness and not being recognised. Many people in older life have to, or sometimes choose to, give up their homes and live elsewhere. They then become dependent on the vagaries (or the rules) of others. This may be connected with the deterioration and tiredness associated with ageing; it may be financial. It has an impact and effects the choices made about how time is spent. Does tension automatically go hand-in-hand with dependency and the needs of others, as one tries to remain true to one's own needs? Choices include living in care or assisted living. But homelessness is a huge issue. It was recognised that we are a privileged group where homelessness is not apparently an issue, and most people had a tolerable lifestyle with many living well because of their previous work lives.

People spoke about having a sense of privilege of being older alongside the fear of not having significance and of not being remembered. At the back of one's mind there lies a question – will my interest in my history be reciprocated by the next generation's interest in me? Bits of me, probably the most useful in the formation of one's identity, will die. Another participant talks about his Mennonite family's 500-year history – and how reassuring that is. As we age, we have fewer figures we can project into; the basis of deep emotional connection with the giants of the generation before us diminishes and that lessens the legacies of their teaching and learning for us. Having figures for projection affects our own ability 'to be held in mind, and be remembered'. We relate to the 'giants' of our psychoanalytic training and the depth of understanding they gave to us and the sense of privilege at having had those life-changing creative experiences. The GR70 event speaks to the continuing need for Tavistock thinking and Tavistock ideas; our anxiety is that those ideas may disperse because they are no longer held collectively by us; that like the fragmentation of society, our 'Tavistock' thinking also fragments.

There is a discussion of the **pros and cons of technology** like the cars that turn off when you stop; the recycling of rubbish and how hard it is for older people to learn the systems of different local authorities – what is recyclable or not? That question points to anxieties about where people feel they will be recycled. How do we fit into our changing places in the cosmos? In our lives we tried making order by making things work, but it doesn't always work out in ways we want and we are forced to understand the nature of randomness. When participants were asked to form small groups, there was hesitation about allowing something random to happen, as if randomness could be controlled. Every day the groups configured differently, most notably sitting in pairs, possibly as

a defence against randomness. Pairs were strongly present in the event, but so were singletons who said they felt excluded by the pairs. The groups discussed why pairs were forming. Why these particular pairs? There were questions of who sits next to whom and trying to make sense of the particular pairing differentiation. It was thought pairing made staff into kindlier consultants; others felt patronised and said they wanted to be treated robustly. The 'technology of group relations' was argued – why are the consultants not taking up transference material? Some participants were former consultants and wanted to run things as they were remembered; how does the absence of fees affect participation? Others are grateful for the generosity, but gratitude may have got in the way of expressing anger. 'The community is holding my life – we cannot be angry in case they take it away'. The porousness of this 'group relations technology' was an issue – people leaving and joining made some feel unsafe which related to their experiences of family and friends dying. Nevertheless, the newness of this group experience was exciting and special.

Loss and Change: re-finding reasons for living

People spoke to the importance of making **new meaningful connections in the face of repeated losses**. Moving the chairs closer together was said to point to the wish for connection or to blot out the missing people and a reluctance to mourn; some spoke of being in continuous mourning; fighting as a survivor or being jealous of what other people have. The urgency of finding someone to connect to in case they would not return tomorrow was linked to the feeling of not being allowed to die, staying alive for others.

Not being able to hear properly and the difficulty in finding a voice was complained about – hearing loss leads to loss of connection and a sense of rivalry in the not hearing. It was noted that at 70, tenderness is more easily allowable; we inhabit our worlds differently at 70 with greater tolerance of the things that were repressed in younger years. The repressed unconscious re-appears easing the way to learning and enabling one to get on with life, doing what we want and having freedom to choose. Status is less relevant which can be let go of more easily in favour of connections with others who make one feel alive, enjoying the kindness of strangers. On the negative side, hearing loss makes one feel loneliness in the presence of others; one feels screened out of discussions; or finding a voice. Redundancy is as painful as losing skills, e.g. child-rearing skills; fatigue increases and defences break down or get re-awakened. In relationships, there is beauty in being alone together, in solitude with someone. Being a singleton in a group may not be all that bad; one can develop a taste for solitude and overcome the thinking that says that to be alone is bad.

Sharing Stories as Cultural Preservation

It seemed very important for people **to tell their story**. Even those who came for part of the event, wanted to tell. Everyone wanted to talk, to tell their stories which included parental choices, relationships and disappointments, drives to force change, ways of dealing with life's difficulties. Many stories were very personal. Why the drive to tell one's story at this stage of our lives? The drive seemed very powerful. People were careful to choose what aspects to tell in this short opportunity. Nevertheless, one got a powerful picture of the participants and their varied lives. Is it age, or do we always want to tell our story so that others will hear it? Is telling one's story a way of organising oneself? Why did those who would not be returning want to tell their personal story, even though there could be no public work done on it? In the Life Stories event, people spoke about lost relationships with parents and grandparents, Jewishness, fear and the violence of the Holocaust and war; abandoning the language of one's grandparents, divorce, moving country and forming reconstituted families, the struggle to learn how to connect to new family systems, and moving on through education and the exercise of one's intelligence to rich and rewarding work that followed. The effect of childhood loss and bereavement, of belonging and not belonging, on choice of career, were important themes. Even for those who had careers in the Tavistock community there were paradoxes and feelings of being an evacuee, of not belonging to the community, of being filled with a sense of incompleteness. Life stories revealed extraordinary mindfulness, generating smart minds and the ambivalence of love – having knife-edge love experiences and glorious plateaus simultaneously; the effect of poverty, boarding school and secrets kept from children about their origins. Some teachers were helpfully understanding and for some the Church was important. Existence in the face of adversity – 'I'm still here!' was felt to be a story of triumph. Society has changed and each generation puts its own stamp on it. Today's children from poor backgrounds can have realisable ambitions. The digital world has made a huge difference. Life stories enabled a different kind of connectedness to the valued parts of the self, offering new opportunities in the face of time running out and still making new friends and having the freedom to choose what one likes.

As the group relations event moved into the 3rd and 4th days, there was **rising hope** and a growing sense of familiarity and of being loved. A benign atmosphere developed in the small and large groups. Someone said they feel the event was a success because they felt more like their age and more accepted for their age. They said they discovered strong feelings, enjoyment and energy, allowing them to be touched by other people's lives. Comments were made about the staff's greater involvement with the participants with interpretations that included themselves. From at first being 'stunned' by the life stories, the event became calmer as if saying 'we have been through something important together'.

Values and Loyalty are Strong, but Fragmenting Lurks

Rules 'were broken' throughout the event. People wondered whether that was a creative new way of doing group relations – participants had been asking for this for years! Or was it linked specifically to the older generation and people in their (relative) maturity, discovering a new way of taking up authority, and a new way of dealing with those around us with authority. 'We broke the rules then and we break the rules now'. Staff conducted the event with minimal rules (time, territory and task) so that it was clear that all other rules were only in our unconscious minds. Have we finally got the message post-70? Or is this a function of a very experienced membership, many of whom have been on staff of group relations conferences? The 'rules' were 'broken' when the participants chose to have fewer groups for the Life Stories Event, and people moving from one group to another. Were rules broken because of anxiety about this event? People seemed both anxious and excited about breaking the unwritten 'rules'? Nevertheless, loose boundaries with participants composing their own groups on the whole was felt to be positive. The '70-year old' boundary created a sense of desirability. There was a feeling of wanting the event to continue longer because it had made people feel younger, quoting Bob Dylan: "I was so much older then, I am so much younger now". People said they feel alive and refreshed, had a sense of spontaneity, of re-grouping and living on, lessons for life – and organising oneself. There was a different sense of time and usage of time, like a shoal of fish or flock of birds who change direction all together without leadership. Also valued was being put in touch with death and the consequences of not keeping something (oneself) alive.



My 1892 walking stick

On the last morning with the ending of the group relations event in sight, the door of the Large Study Group room would not close. It was said to stand for the outside world refusing to disappear, despite the participants retreating into themselves. Instead, the participants discovered old and new ways of being which included 'putting your hand out' and risking receiving something friendly or hostile, or avoided altogether. At this point a dream was presented about collecting things for a yacht that the dreamer would skipper, but she prevaricates and does not get anywhere. Alongside this are competing thoughts about religion and faith that is meant to offer succour or managing life without God. 'The Tavistock God got me through huge difficulties', one said. The gift of the relationship with the Tavistock and with psychoanalysis and immersing in Tavistock experiences made living possible – 'without them I wouldn't be here'. A genius idea, it was said, of having an over 70s event and the group feels both proud of a Tavistock skippered by a potent Jewish woman. Eliat's talk about orphans finding a home and doing well is recalled and this points to the 'orphan' Tavistock Institute that is separate and independent and is doing well. Eliat's talk had pointed out that most Disney stories are about orphans. In the Torah story, Abraham is told leave his birthplace, his father's house, to go out and manage himself in the world. The obverse is told by a participant who is prevented from meeting her grandchildren by her daughter-in-law and Church provided no solace. People suffer from evil things and women can also use their power destructively. Women live longer and therefore more women are single; men are a rare commodity, and therefore, male friendships are important. Diversity is not only in terms of race or colour; gender diversity in the over 70s tells a different story. As the group relations event draws closer to the end, there is an urgent appeal to know what else might be concealed, to speak before it is too late. The group is facing finality and it wishes to continue because a delightful vibrancy was found here just as it was wonderful to find so many men here. It turned out the concealed parts not spoken were feelings about life without work, love or sex and discovering that perhaps love and sex were possible without work.

Discussion

The GR70 event opened with a discussion about priority seating on the Underground that led to an elaboration about relationships between the young and the old. This statement on priority was the key to later themes about the passage of time, changes in roles over a lifetime of being a child, parenting and career, and importantly, signalling the necessary adaptations older people have to make around 'letting go' and utilising different more pleasurable opportunities for personal fulfilment and relationships. Common ageing processes like physical and mental debilitation, loss of partner and loneliness, it was discovered, could be contemplated with enhanced sense of strength through creative participation in groups of this kind. This group relations event passed through a number of phases common in group process – initial apprehension, distrust and challenge, complaint, objection and protest, until it could break through to find greater optimism and affirmation of themselves and others.

A group of participants was searching for the past 'good Tavistock' and were resentful with what they found. They represented a search for the Transference and put pressure on the staff to occupy the transference position more than the staff had wanted. This group's behaviour and statements aroused considerable hostility towards them by the rest of the event for what felt like a curious lack of curiosity about the context of the event or what had happened to group relations over the past 40-50 years. Perhaps their behaviour related to a view that in certain quarters, psychoanalysis seemed to have forgotten about the transference. Nevertheless, this sub-set may have represented a group life force insofar as they had not given up, but insisted on being heard, for they appeared to be holding the mourning for what was; for something that is over and what might have been – a death force that serves to trigger a life force. The sub-group of participants showing their resentment at not finding the idealised Tavistock, nevertheless showed their vulnerabilities and they exposed the staff's vulnerabilities too – their ageing and infirmities, and, at times, not holding the boundaries of the event safely and in line with tradition. Participants from abroad brought links with group relations conferences worldwide to the fore.

People attracted to the GR70 event mostly had previous group relations conference experience and they were curious about the application of group relations conference methodology to this particular spectrum of their lives – being 70 or over. In traditional group relations conference methodology, group learning is given precedence over private individual learning. In GR70, however, the method combined a group-oriented focus with a focus on the experience of being 70, the purpose of which was discovering the emotional resonances arising from this stage of life and providing opportunities to learn, gain support and actively change attitudes and behaviour. Indeed, in the part of the programme dealing with Future Life Stories, people spoke enthusiastically about new ideas and creative planning – making pots, baking bread, engaging in Gregorian chants, mountain-climbing and sailing.

New Friendships Develop

The dynamics of pairs were strong. Participants were single, or had a partner or had lost a partner. There were others with recent losses evoking memories of early separations and survival. Cross-cultural transitions in earlier life were mirrored in the transitions being made now to another age that produced a sense of urgency of things needing to be done right away, like the establishment of new friendships. For many, the most exciting learning was the making of new friends in the event.

Although no formal staff meetings were held during the event, issues of containment were always on the minds of staff. The duration of the event (4 consecutive mornings), the dip-in, dip-out nature of participation and factors connected with the venue, like one glass wall that people outside could see through into the room, and the presence of a few not-yet-70 year olds, affected maintenance of the boundaries and therefore of containment. In the community meetings, however, containment was sufficient to keep thinking flourishing. Thoughts about living and dying were surfaced, but it seemed discussions about love and sex were more difficult to have.

Improvements in the design of the programme could, for instance, be introduced, like staff meetings, the way the groups form for the Life Story sessions; and the staff contribution to the difficulties that occurred, like people swapping groups. Perhaps more structure and more time could be allowed for the forming of the groups at the beginning of the life stories session. Tight time slots (45 minutes) perhaps prevented the working through of many issues.

The setting was good, especially with the room dividers that provided a sense of the whole group relations event – a fractal design in which the groups held different themes of the total event. It was a good-enough setting and it worked well despite some difficulties in boundary management. The design allowed for an amazing event; it had a sophisticated membership. There is now a demonstrable opening for more group relations events for the older generation.

Acknowledgements

The inspiration, design and delivery of the GR70 event was the result of the thinking and efforts of a large number of people. These include Juliet Scott, the Director of the Tavistock Institute's Festival marking the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Tavistock Institute who encouraged and supported the event from start to finish; Leonie Sher who sparked the original idea in me of running a group relations event for people 70 and over to match the age of the Institute; Meg Davies, Project Manager of the Festival who skilfully negotiated our entry and use of the Garden Museum; Charlie Bambrough who managed the pre-event administration and served as administrator and boundary-keeper during the event; Hannah Walsh, who assisted with the dissemination and marketing of the event. I am particularly grateful to my colleague staff members David Armstrong, Olya Khaleelee, William Halton and Deirdre Moylan, some of whom came out of retirement to serve on the staff, for their love of this work and willingness to donate their time and their wisdom to work on this important topic. Their contribution to this paper is gratefully acknowledged. Our working histories go back a long way and it was a pleasure reassembling and getting into role again. And finally, I salute the 32 participants who came to learn and in the process gave hugely of themselves, their experiences and their hopes in shared endeavour for a better future.

Appendix

The Primary Task of the Group Relations Event for the Silver Generation – the study in the here-and-now of the experiences of being 70 and over – dovetailed well with the overall theme of the Tavistock Institute's 70th anniversary Festival "Re-Imagining Human Relations in Our Time", because 're-imagining human relations' for the over 70's is exactly what the 32 participants and 5 staff did during the four mornings of GR70. What started as general discussions about getting on in age and the mostly negative consequences of that, turned into significant re-imaginings of what energies and vitality and creative potentials older people could still mobilise in themselves, in their lives and with each other, especially in the area of making and sustaining new relationships.

Facts and Figures

Thirty-two participants signed up for GR70 – 19 females and 13 males. Participants hailed from Australia, Finland (2), France, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, UK (21) and the USA (4). Because GR70 was part of the larger Festival context, membership boundaries were flexible so that participants could attend other Festival events. The dip-in, dip-out porous boundary arrangement was challenged as being unlike traditional Tavistock group relations conferences, as well as appreciated for its innovation and flexibility in allowing participants to absent themselves, if necessary. No day had less than 26 participants. Everyone was rushing about. People had many different events to attend and they had to choose. Sometimes that meant choosing to be elsewhere. Yet, everyone seemed to love it!! The international membership, the high attendance rates and the appreciative comments by many people of the fact of the event itself, spoke to a need in older people for opportunities to address, deeply, their daily life and end-of-life issues. The facilitated group experience in the Tavistock tradition was a key element that enabled people to speak openly about their hopes and fears. People hoped more GR70-type events could be offered.



Doreene and Richard

Methodology

Most of the 32 participants had had previous relationships with either the Tavistock Institute or the Tavistock Clinic. This meant that they were familiar with Tavistock ideas and in particular the group relations method. Speaking intensely about life issues came relatively easily to them, but it did so too for the members who had no previous connections with the Tavistock. Traditionally, group relations conferences employ a theme and a method. Usually, themes like 'authority', 'leadership', 'organisation', 'task', 'role' and other similar terms, make way for greater emphasis on the lived experience of inter-personal, intra-group and inter-group relationships that unfold in the here-and-now events of the conference. The challenge for group relations as a method of social enquiry has been in the application of the methodology to different social contexts where the method forms, not the foreground, but rather the background, and the main focus turns on the social context under examination. Examples of application of group relations to social context include experiential learning in India (Chattopadhyay & Mathur, 2012); sexual abuse (Litvin & Bonwitt, 2006); career development (Izod, 2006); the ecology of public schools (Mack, 2006); financial institutions (de Jager & Sher, 2009); Dalit empowerment in India (Viswanath, 2009); and diversity in local government in New Zealand (Tagore, 2015).

GR70 is such an example, where the group relations method is relied upon to study the social phenomenon of ageing as experienced by the individual participants working in groups, and not traditional themes of authority, leadership and organisation. It is this combination of individual experience shared in groups that makes the event a powerful one; where group spirit moves people from a depressed state to one of great energetic drive to make the most of life's opportunities, to search after the new and discover levels of creativity and inspiration; to be adventurous, to take risks and to find a new sense of excitement and optimism in living.



Design

The design of GR70 consisted of 4 Whole Community meetings (one at the beginning of each day); 3 Small Community meetings (on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd days); 3 Life Story sessions (past life stories on the 2nd and 3rd days, and Future Life Stories on the 4th day); 3 Reflection-on-the-day sessions (1st, 2nd and 3rd days) and 2 plenaries (opening and closing). All meetings and sessions were facilitated by the GR70 staff whose role was to manage the time and space boundaries of the meetings; to make sense of the unfolding dynamics of the meetings as reflected by the participants verbal material and behaviours; and, where appropriate, to share their understanding with the groups in order to help deepen the participants' experiences, feelings, insights and awareness of being 70 or over from their individual and group perspectives. In most of the small groups, staff worked in pairs, one staff member acting as facilitator/consultant and the other acting as scribe. In the large groups and plenaries, 3 staff acted as consultants and 2 as scribes. At times, the scribes spoke consultatively. The design of GR70 did not allow time for staff meetings, a traditional feature of group relations conferences, so staff dynamics were worked on in informal ways – at the 15-20 minute check-in meeting each morning and brief conversations as could be snatched at coffee breaks.

Venue

The venue was the Garden Museum next to Lambeth Palace in South London. Only one quite beautiful room overlooking the ancient church garden, was used. This meant that portable room dividers had to be placed in the room quickly during the coffee break to create 3 spaces for the small groups. The arrangement worked well providing a sense of 3 fractals of the whole, in spite of the tight squeeze and the flowing sounds from the adjoining small groups. For the Life Stories events the groups that formed all worked in one open space without room dividers. The general hubbub in the room did not detract from the groups' functioning.

About the illustrations

The illustrations in this paper are by TIHR artist in residence Juliet Scott. Juliet was the 70th anniversary festival director. These illustrations came out of a struggle in balancing her TIHR work including the festival with ageing and unwell parents. These drawings became a form of reverie and appreciation of old age, as a place where she found herself able to meaningfully relate with the life stories, the energy and dynamism of those in the drawings and in particular her parents. Also featured in the drawings are the older people who Entelechy Arts work with and support in Tower Bridge Care Home and Entelechy's art installation 'Bed'. Bed was performed at the festival along with the GR70 event. It was devised by older members of Entelechy Arts Theatre Group who wanted to make a statement about the invisibility they felt when going about their lives in public places.

All artworks on Fabriano Postcard Watercolour Paper, 10.5 x 14.8 cm

References

Chattopadhyay, G. & Mathur, A. (2012). Experiential Learning: the Indian experience from the proto-historic period to the present. In: E. Aram, R. Baxter & A. Nutkevitch. (Eds.) *Group Relations Conferences: Tradition, Creativity and Succession in the Global Group Relations Network*. Vol. III. Pgs. 23-40. London: Karnac.

de Jager, W. & Sher, M. (2009). Knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing: The application of group relations to organisational development and change with a financial institution. In: E. Aram, R. Baxter & A. Nutkevitch. (Eds.) *Adaptation and Innovation: Theory, Design, Role-taking in Group Relations Conferences and their Applications*. Vol. II. Pgs. 145-162. London: Karnac.

Izod, K. (2006). Mutuality and Interdependence: applications of group relations perspectives to issues of career ownership and development. In: L. Brunner, A. Nutkevitch & M. Sher, (Eds.) *Group Relations Conferences: Reviewing and Exploring Theory, Design, Role-taking and Application*. Vol. I. Pgs. 79-93. London: Karnac.

Litvin, I. & Bonwitt, G. (2006). Sexual abuse: application and adaptation of basic group relations concepts, technique and culture to a specific social issue. In: L. Brunner, A. Nutkevitch & M. Sher, (Eds.) *Group Relations Conferences: Reviewing and Exploring Theory, Design, Role-taking and Application*. Vol. I. Pgs. 47-60. London: Karnac.

Mack, C. (2006). Surfacing the ecology of public school organisations: the centrality of groups and their dependency container. In: L. Brunner, A. Nutkevitch & M. Sher, (Eds.) *Group Relations Conferences: Reviewing and Exploring Theory, Design, Role-taking and Application*. Vol. I. Pgs. 94-107. London: Karnac.

Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: a therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Boston, MA, USA: Houghton Mifflin Company. pp. 87-88. ISBN 9780395084090. OCLC 172718.

Shibles, W. (1997). *Humor Reference Guide: A Comprehensive Classification and Analysis*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. ISBN 0-8093-2097-5.

Tagore, R. (2015). Embedding Diversity in local government: experiences of establishing and ethnic advisory panel, Auckland, New Zealand. In: E. Aram, R. Baxter & A. Nutkevitch. (Eds.) *Exploring the Impact and Relevance Within and Beyond its Network*. Vol. IV. Pgs. 57-78. London: Karnac.

Viswanath, R. (2009). Identity, Leadership and Authority: Experiences in application of group relations concepts for Dalit empowerment in India. In: E. Aram, R. Baxter & A. Nutkevitch. (Eds.) *Adaptation and Innovation: Theory, Design, Role-taking in Group Relations Conferences and their Applications*. Vol. II. Pgs. 179-198. London: Karnac.

Post Script

My comments on the GR70 paper and illustrations:

I have just read the review of a new book out: *The Happiness Curve: Why Life Gets Better After Midlife* by Jonathan Rauch; pub: Green Tree, in which Rauch says that stress drops after the age of 50. We get a better grip on our emotions, feel less regret and are not as prone to depression. Physical decline is not mirrored by a drop in life satisfaction. Older people are more focussed on the here and now and don't, contrary to stereotype, dwell excessively on the past. And they are as Laura Carstenson, the director of the Stanford University's centre on longevity, puts it, "more attuned to the sweetness of life".

Wiser and more interested in helping others, we learn after the tricky midlife years to lower our sights and be more settled. Rauch speculates that this may be how, as a social tribal species, we evolved. It makes sense for us to be competitive when young, then after the parenting years, to do less egocentric things *for the good of the group* (my italics). To do that we need this midlife transitional period when we undergo a "slow motion reboot of our emotional software to repurpose us for a different role in society". Rauch argues that midlife low level despondency is like adolescence. The difference between the group going through adolescence and one bumping along in midlife unhappiness is that "one of them has a *supportive social environment* (my italics), whereas the other has red sports cars." Rauch recommends that "each of us create a safe space for people in our own lives."

My comment is that this is exactly what we found in GR70 – that people having got over some of their initial apprehension that the event was going to be about hearing repeated tales of anxiety, loss and depression, discovered to their surprise, that their membership of the group/s gave them an exhilarating sense of vitality, optimism, sense of purpose and will to live. These processes are described in the paper, lifting spirits away from finality and more towards there is life yet in these old bones and that life is to be done with others in groups.

Mannie Sher

This monograph marks the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations' 70th anniversary celebrations in 2017 and the launch of the Tavistock Institute's Archive project with the Wellcome Library. The paper is creative testimony to the continuing intellectual contribution of the Tavistock Institute to improving human relations.



ISBN 978-1-9999479-2-7



9 781999 947927 >