

MANNIE SHER INTERVIEW



This interview, which took place on 25 October 2004, was carried out by Emma Bell (EB) from Queen Mary College, University of London, and Scott Taylor (ST) from the University of Birmingham:

EB: How does the theory of holism, as practiced at the Tavistock Institute, link individual and organizational dynamics?

MS: The early Tavistock researchers were convinced that the prevailing theories of the mind could be extrapolated to other forms of human association - families, groups, organizations, communities, and beyond, to society. Brains, remember, are located in individuals, so it was important to develop a perspective that encompassed the individual and the family, the individual and the group, the individual and the organization and the individual and society.

EB: Are there specific types of organizations that are more receptive to the Tavistock systems psychodynamic ways of thinking? You seem to have a strong representation of public sector people, like health professionals, attending Leicester conferences.

MS: Human services, care organisations (health, social care, faith, education, academia, public protection bodies) are major sources of delegates to group relations conferences. An increasing number of delegates are organisational development consultants who want to deepen their understanding of the work they are doing with their client organisations.

ST: It seems in the Tavistock's heyday in the '60s and '70s, group relations methods and philosophies were mainstream in companies like ICI.

MS: There was much excitement in those days in the Human Relations School. Experience showed that the relationship between people as political creatures and designers and operators of technical systems could be better understood this way. There was a ferment about Tavistock conceptualization that emphasised inter-dependence, not cause-and-effect linearity. People were happy to suspend 'prediction' for a while and reflect on their experiences of work. Organisations were eager to pick up 'Tavistock' ideas and use them to create new organisational structures and working practices. Organisations still send small groups of people to 'Leicester' so that it is easier for them to introduce new processes 'back home'. Tavistock's system psychodynamics approaches are still relevant and used extensively today in areas like work re-design, culture change, improving strategic thinking, negotiating internal and external boundaries, achieving a better understanding of roles, working out issues of leadership and authority and so on.

EB: Why are Tavistock approaches sometimes described as 'subversive'?

MS: Because of the premise that social and organizational behaviour can be construed as defenses against anxiety. The task of consultancy and conferences is to ask: what is the anxiety that is being defended against? our hypothesis being that knowing more about the nature of the anxiety enables better structures and systems of work to be created. Take, for instance, the anxiety about failing. We worry about failing and the worry gets institutionalised through numerous time-wasting meetings, checks and double-checks and procedures. The threat of failure, loss of face and survival anxieties, impact on the way

people think and behave and the way structures are created. Equally, overwhelming anxieties over survival can lead to states of denial and then the denial needs challenging.

EB: So the 'Tavistock method' is about encouraging people/organisations to face anxieties?

MS: Yes, evidence suggests that appropriately timed and paced facing of anxieties is requisite for successful functioning at individual and organisational levels. So, for instance, when working with a major British oil company recently, the one thing the teams I was working with could not talk about was pollution. They emphasised through their demeanour, their speech, their marketing with pictures of beautiful buildings, green landscapes and silver aeroplanes, that civilisation and oil go together. Of course, they do, but they could not see the dark side of what oil is doing to the world?

EB: So what happens?

MS: The organisation could not easily consider its 'internal pollution', the toxic stuff that made the organisation less 'civilised', cutting people off from each other in their work relationships. 'Human-ness' was siphoned out of the organization. One needs to be sceptical of the rhetoric about collaboration, co-operation and partnership in and between organisations.

EB: How do you deal with it?

MS: By using concepts like Kurt Lewin's total field, (field theory or systems theory) and Wilfred Bion's group unconscious (psychoanalytical theory). The combination of these bodies of knowledge has made the Tavistock contribution to understanding organisations, communities and society one of the most powerful tools of study available.

EB: What about working with feelings and emotions?

MS: Feelings and emotions are important in relation to any task. In the case of the 'Leicester' conference, the task is learning about the behaviour of a group of which one is a participating member. This task of learning is focussed on the group itself, its internal relationships, relationships with other groups and the larger system of which the group is a part and that generates strong feelings. But the task is learning about group dynamics, it is about studying the roles that one takes up and the roles that are thrust on one, unbidden; that kind of learning is accompanied by anxiety. It's not about therapy and it's not formal education. A small study group at 'Leicester' will typically have twelve delegates working with one consultant. The obvious contributing factors to dynamics will be gender, race, age, profession, religion, nationality, physical appearance, personal manner, mixed in, of course, with often well-controlled and hidden feelings and emotions, like competition and collaboration, rivalry and envy, withdrawal and involvement, aggression and passivity, fusion and separateness, and so on.

EB: What about the factors that people bring with them?

MS: These are important - anxieties about becoming part of the conference, one's thoughts and fears, how one gets to be placed or finds oneself in a particular group, one's likes and dislikes - millions of little particles of dynamics that flow around in groups.

EB: How do people translate their conference learning back into their workplaces?

MS: There is no doubt after being ensconced in what we call a 'social island' for two weeks with people with whom one has gone through an intense journey, that going back to work can be difficult. I would hope that if delegates have learned just one lesson, it would be that nothing changes unless you take authority to change it.

EB: So the responsibility is with the individual to do that?

MS: Yes, because in the broadest sense, organisational structures inhibit the expression of individuality. So people may return to work and keep their heads down again.

EB: Do people return to 'Leicester' and if so, why?

MS: Yes. Once exposed to a Tavistock group relations way of viewing things, people often realize that is the way they want to work. They may realise that in their work they need an in-depth understanding of group and organizational dynamics. We cater for different levels of group relations conference experience by running two or three sub-conferences within each 'Leicester' conference - an 'A' sub-conference (for first timers), a 'B' sub-conference (for those who have been to a 'Leicester' conference before) and a Training Group (for those who have been to a 'B' sub-conference before).

EB: Is there a sense that group relations is a belief system and people come to renew their faith each year?

MS: Don't we all? If one is isolated from one's professional group, one is diminished whether one is physicist or a group relations consultant. Yes, there is belief in the method as a uniquely powerful way of accessing the unconscious determinants of individual, group and organizational behaviour. One needs to renew one's philosophical and conceptual tools base in order to work better. People come to sharpen their skills, rather than offer up a restatement of their faith. It is not a cultish thing. We are concerned with practical day-to-day organizational and social issues and how they affect people. We are concerned with creating and disseminating knowledge.

EB: At what stage in people's careers do they attend 'Leicester' conferences?

MS: The average age of people attending 'Leicester' is forty-four, so they are concerned with mid-life and mid-career changes. Recent research showed that six months after a conference, half the members had changed jobs. Was the conference a trigger for change? Or was change on people's minds anyway and the conference was used to work through the issues for them?

ST: Does 'Leicester' have a spiritual or religious atmosphere? Would people bring religious and spiritual concerns to the conference? And would there be a conflict between conference methods and philosophies and people's religious and spiritual concerns?

MS: Let me think. Does the conference experience undermine established religious beliefs? It may do so, or it may strengthen them, because the unconscious is a mine of dramas, dreams and drives; it is complex and chaotic. There are no rules. Confronting the group unconscious and working with it, is part of the conference method. People may find that intensely spiritual. For instance, where have you ever been in a group of sixty or seventy or eighty people where there is silent thoughtful reflection? And where have you ever been in a group of that size where people don't interrupt each other; where somehow the group organizes itself to allow people to speak? It is an intense experience. But, yes, on the other hand, the conference experience can make one question one's assumptions about the universe and one's role in it.

EB: Are you working with notions of self-actualization, higher order selfhood and consciousness?

MS: I use terms like understanding, insight, learning, personal authority. There are multiple layers of learning. Everyone will be in a different place; there is no single objective point for people to reach. For some people the conference will be a lost opportunity; for others, it will be a defining experience; for most, they will deepen their understanding and working knowledge of group and organisational dynamic processes.

ST: Would you define the 'Leicester' conferences as quasi-religious or spiritual?

MS: I feel uncomfortable with that. The stance of the conference is educational. The application of conference learning is the responsibility of the individual delegate. Principles of individual autonomy are central to the culture of group relations working conferences. Something spiritual may be contained in that idea

EB: The conference brochure emphasises leadership. Isn't leadership in organizations about the power relationships between those who lead and those who are led? What are the implications for those who are not in leadership roles?

MS: Leadership, remember, is not the same thing as leaders. The word is an abstract noun and it means different things. Fundamentally, there can be no leadership without followership. Being a good follower is necessary for good team functioning; it requires training and learning. There is a strong dynamic relationship between leadership and followership. One can be a leader one moment and a follower the next. Moving between those roles is a necessary for successful membership of systems. We are always both leader and follower simultaneously, as one constantly moves position in relation to other people - those above, below, horizontally, sides, back and front. In group relations conferences, leadership and followership, power and authority are constantly on the agenda. All phenomena which identify people, can become a focus for other people to latch on to, positively or negatively. For instance, there is a common dependency relationship, a leadership-followership dynamic between patient and doctor. In conferences where the Director is a psychiatrist or psychotherapist, someone feeling unsteady and vulnerable might turn to the Director, for mental health leadership, not organisational leadership. The Director may not consider it to be within the Director role to offer individual mental health help. In other words, a certain type of leadership is being asked for and not given. That can be disturbing because the vulnerable person does not know what to do with their followership tendency (and fantasies). Other delegates may think that because someone was vulnerable, they may unconsciously leave it to that person to 'lead' on dependency. There are multiple elements of leadership manifest in the conference, some of which attract followers and others don't.

EB: So such a person might serve as the 'unconscious leader'?

MS: Yes, someone might become a leader for 'strangeness' or 'rebellion' or 'withdrawal', and if we are unaware of these dynamics relationships one can actually make matters either worse, or better, by acknowledging that we may all at different moments feel 'strange', 'rebellious' or 'withdrawn'. By publicly acknowledging that, the 'leader' of 'strangeness', 'rebellion' or 'withdrawal' is let off the hook.

EB: It sounds a bit scary.

MS: There can be tough moments. When one's behaviour and assumptions are challenged, it can get difficult. In the Tavistock approach, an individual who speaks and who remains unchallenged is considered to be speaking on behalf of the group. In other words, silence is regarded as assent. We are all players in the larger systems we inhabit. We may think we are acting as individuals, but often we act under unconscious pressure from the group. The skill of the consultant is to unravel and interpret those dynamics. 'Tavistock' consultants would rarely identify an individual without reference to a group dynamic. They would be anxious to avoid individualising a group process. The interpretation may suggest that the person, or the two or three people, are enacting something on behalf of the group. A man and a woman, for instance, might get into a tussle about maleness and femaleness, while the rest of the group looks on. The consultant might interpret that the two are enacting maleness-femaleness on behalf of the others.

ST: Are the 'Leicester' conferences defined mostly by race and gender issues?

MS: 'Leicester' certainly deals with race and gender issues, but it emphasises authority, leadership, organisation and boundary management. But contemporary social and political issues, like the war in Iraq, terrorism, ethnicity, government, economics of third world countries, conflict in the Middle East, come up regularly.

EB: What would you like to be remembered for as the Director of the Group Relations Programme?

MS: I would like to be remembered for emphasising the relationship of the knowledge that is developed in the conference and its application to organizations and society. I have worked to distance the conference as a quasi-therapeutic experience. I would like to be remembered for introducing research into group relations; that group relations should take its place as a scientific method of enquiry and be debated and criticised from a research standpoint. I'd like to be remembered as having re-ignited

enthusiasm for group relations learning following its slow-down towards the end of the eighties. We are moving ahead now - an autumn group relations conference was re-introduced this year. We are applying theories, knowledge, methods and techniques of group relations to every kind of social and organisational study.