

2024 GRC: A Study of Authority and Social Identity in the context of Humility, Curiosity, and Empathy

A Three-Day Group Relations Conference
in the Tavistock Tradition
to be held in person at
Teachers College, Columbia University
August 2-4, 2024



Meeting days and times:

Friday	08/2/24	8:30 am -- 5:30 pm
Saturday	08/3/24	8:30 am -- 5:45 pm
Sunday	08/4/24	8:30 am -- 5:45 pm

The conference check-in takes place on Friday from 8:00 am to 8:30 am. There is an optional social gathering for all on Sunday from 5:45-6:15pm

Conference location:

Teachers College, Columbia University
525 West 120th Street
New York, New York 10027

Please be prepared to show a Teachers College, Columbia University ID or a valid government-issued ID card when you enter the Teachers College campus.

The History

AGAPE

To do this work involves courage, commitment, and competence, but above all, it requires love. Working with groups is based on the ancient Greek concept of agape. Love for [hu]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.

Leroy Wells, Jr.

The Tavistock Model of Group Relations, developed in London, England in the 1950s is the model upon which this conference is based. In 1965, Margaret Rioch and A. Kenneth Rice, for whom the A.K. Rice Institute is named, imported the model to the United States. This time-honored method of studying unconscious dynamics in groups has been the basis of conferences held in France, Italy, Israel, China, Argentina, India, and many other countries around the world. In this work, staff and members are asked, within their roles, to explore the conscious and unconscious dynamics of the conference, also known as a 'temporary organization.'

We do this by studying our own behavior in the various events, and using as tools, both intellect and emotion, without neglecting one for the other.

In an event that purposefully studies authority, it is especially important to address issues of authorization. The Social-Organizational Psychology Program of Teachers College, Columbia University, in partnership with the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, authorizes this conference. However, there are many other levels of authorization supporting this enterprise. We will identify and study these as a part of our work together.

Curiosity



Every group relations conference is a temporary institution containing elements from the tradition as well as elements that are new and a function of the people, staff and members, who enter it, engage with it, shape it, and learn inside of it. The explicit invitation for this conference is that we, staff and members, bring our collective curiosity into the moment. The notion of curiosity invites a way of thinking and approaching what others say and do, and what we say and do. The group relations tradition holds learning as one of its core tenets, and this may be enhanced in a space of curiosity rather than judgment about what we see, hear, feel and how we approach the work and each other. The membership and staff of this temporary institution are invited to approach the work with a willingness to repeatedly ask ourselves – how am I bringing curiosity to this moment?

Humility and Empathy

Merriam-Webster defines humility as freedom from pride or arrogance, the quality or state of being humble. What does it mean to be in humble interaction with others, free from pride and arrogance? What opportunities exist in that space? Where has humility morphed, as in the popular, “humble brag”? How do we find confident authority without arrogance? How do we respond when we see it in others?

The Washington Post states that “In a 2016 College of Charleston survey, 56% of 5th and 6th graders said that the ‘humble’ are embarrassed, sad, lonely or shy. True humility, scientists have learned, is when someone has an *accurate* assessment of both their strengths and weaknesses, and they see all this in the context of the larger whole. They are a part of something far greater than themselves. They know they are not the center of the universe. And they’re both grounded and liberated by this knowledge. Recognizing our own abilities, we can ask how to contribute. Recognizing our flaws, we can ask how to grow.”

These thoughts and questions may invite the notion of empathy.

Merriam-Webster defines empathy as the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.

Also from the Washington Post, “Empathy has often been tossed around in the month since the election as a panacea to heal the country’s wounds. And... it’s not clear empathy would be an entirely positive force.... Empathy has become a Silicon Valley buzzword that describes an understanding of user experience, and the political meaning is very similar. We empathize with someone, frequently, because we want to change their mind – whether that person is an undecided voter, a potential customer or a first date.... There’s also the practical question of empathy exhaustion...attempting to help in all these many directions can lead to burn-out, our brains simply fritzing under the mega-load of the world’s emotional chaos, if we don’t find a way to redefine our approach... Empathy is a tool that requires practice and work. The ability to expand it beyond our immediate circle, to exercise it under extraordinary circumstances, and then to turn it off when we need to rest, may not come naturally to everyone. But it can be learned.”

What can we learn about our practice of empathy in group relations?

Conference Design

The Group Relations methodology provides opportunities to raise our awareness of the dynamics that occur in groups and organizations through *experience*. Primary among these dynamics is the opportunity to study the nature of authority and its partner, responsibility, as it is being exercised. In this conference, members and staff are particularly invited to highlight the study of group identity and unconscious processes, but are not limited to these concepts. Organizational dynamics such as leadership, followership, power, roles, norms, task, boundaries, attractiveness, responsibility, individual differences, and many others are available for study as well. All of this constitutes the core work of the conference.

The conference is designed to provide these opportunities for learning through events that offer different experiences of authority, task, role, membership, and setting. For example, some of the events, known as here-and-now events, provide an opportunity to consider the group’s dynamics as they are occurring. Others, known as there-and-then events, provide an opportunity to review and reflect upon what has already occurred. All conference events are described below on page 5.

Core Themes

Authority is defined as the right and responsibility to do work. Authorization involves giving over or delegating some of one's formal authority so others might do work on our behalf. Authority can be formal and informal. Both staff members and participants possess authority, and both will choose to exercise it in particular ways, the nature of which forms the basis of much of what we will study.

Authority in an organizational context is derived from both the roles one holds and from one's person. We will discover together how staff and members exercise their authority to do conference work.

Identity includes such groupings as gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, religious preference, sexual orientation and identity, marital status, ability/disability, geographic location, age, socioeconomic status, caste, and culture, etc., as well as organizational identities. Some of these memberships are permanent, others temporary. In addition to the way in which we embrace or reject our group identities, those identities interact with the identities of others, and to make matters even more complex, they interact with the perceived group identities of others. Finally, we may experience one or more of our own or others' group identities as more salient than the others. This is the nature of human interaction and this conference provides an opportunity to explore that, rather than make assumptions, or ignore it entirely.

Unconscious, or out-of-awareness dynamics, are often associated with the context of psychoanalysis. Data such as slips of the tongue, and dream content have long been studied in that discipline. The Group Relations methodology also considers phenomena that may rest outside of common awareness as a tool to explore group dynamics. Therefore, valid data at the group level include not only conscious thought and manifest behavior, but evidence of a group unconscious such as archetypes, synchronicity, myths, fantasies, fleeting thoughts, unconscious planning and conference dreams, the sharing of which contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of this temporary organization.

“Silence helps us to re-engage with the poetry of life, it helps us to notice and become more aware. It may also help as a holding space for creative work, for contemplating new ideas. In this [moment of] retreat, we purposely seek the combination of silence and work.”

-R. Molenkamp & A. Van Linge

The Events

Conference Plenaries

Plenary events provide all staff and participants the opportunity to meet together for the purpose of sharing information and providing opportunities for reflection and discussion. The conference plenaries include the Conference Opening and Discussion, the Organizational Event Opening and Closing, and the Reflections.

The Small Study Group

The building block of the group relations model, this event provides members with the opportunity to study their own behavior in the here-and-now in groups of approximately 8-12 with the consultation of one or occasionally two staff members. The small group replicates real life groups such as work or sport teams, clubs, etc. The consultant will provide intervention only when he/she believes that it will advance the group's learning.

The Review and Application Group

Members work in smaller configurations with one or two staff members who facilitate their work in reviewing and reflecting upon their conference experience and in beginning to apply their learning to the complexities of their lives outside of the conference.

The Large Study Group

The unique opportunity of the large group is to study the dynamics of a system with so many members that size limits the opportunity for face-to-face interaction. This replicates large-scale events such as conventions, concerts, or school board meetings. The large study group includes all conference members and a team of consultants who offer here-and-now consultation when they feel that it will advance the learning of the group.

The Organizational Event

This Organizational Event exists as a small conference within the conference. Its purpose is to provide opportunities to learn about dynamics between and among groups. It provides an opportunity to choose one's group membership, to take up formal and informal leadership roles, to be deliberate about one's choices around followership in those groups, to experience and observe staff in administrative, management, as well as consulting roles, and to co-construct and co-manage the closing plenary event along with staff.

The Staff

It is the purpose of all staff working in directing, administrative or consulting roles to encourage and support participant awareness, analysis, reflection and understanding of the emerging conference dynamics. Staff members are not only observers of the process, but are actively involved in it. They will be examining, interpreting, reflecting upon and making sense of their own as well as the various groups' experiences, particularly those that may lay outside of awareness, that is, in the unconscious. The consulting staff's interpretations will focus on group-level phenomena rather than on individual behavior. For those who have not yet experienced this approach, it may seem unusual. Staff photos and brief biographies will be provided digitally at registration.

This conference is available to students of Teachers College, Columbia University, and affiliated schools as well as others from the public seeking to learn about group dynamics and organizational processes. To preserve the integrity of the group dynamic, applicants should attend all events.

Experiential learning of this nature may be stressful. If you are undergoing undue stress in your life, please confer with your professor if you are a student and otherwise with the conference Director of Administration regarding the advisability of applying for membership at a later date.

To secure your place in the conference membership, you will need to complete the online registration by 5:00pm ET, Thursday, July 11 at: <https://form.jotform.com/241636765633160>. Please direct any questions to the Conference Administrative Team at teacherscollegeGRC@gmail.com

Conference Director: Flora N. Taylor, Ph.D.

Director of Administration: Chelsea Rodriguez, M.A.

- The three themes humility, curiosity and empathy were inspired by Professor Amy Edmondson's convocation speech at Teachers College on May 14, 2024.
- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/12/08/leaders-are-more-powerful-when-theyre-humble-new-research-shows/> (edited for gender neutrality)
- <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/15/how-empathy-became-a-weapon-we-use-against-others/> (edited for gender neutrality)