NOTES ON CONVENING LARGE GROUPS AND CONSULTING TO THEM

I have been asked to provide a few notes and a brief bibliography about how I see large group events and consultation to them, which is usually termed the ‘leadership’ of them, and to indicate the basis for how I usually work. Circulating these notes and bibliography are intended to help define the experience of a Large Reflection Group as a more didactic learning experience, which is useful for people who need to claim educational credits for participating in such an event.

1. It is said that a small group consists of between 3 and approximately 15 members, a median group of between 16 and 32 members, and a large group of between 33 and an infinite number of members. These are approximate ranges, and there is intense debate about the cut-off points. I use the term “infinite”, because as the number of members increases there is a strong tendency towards the formation of sub-groups and contra-groups as well as structuration, differentiation and specialisation of roles and the development of hierarchies, so that the group tends to become an organisation rather than a group. There is little empirical research on the actual numbers involved, but we know from experience that there is an “ordinal” tendency towards this. Another factor is that in situ large groups as such are actually rather rare, although obviously there are large groupings of various kinds, such as organisations, societies,
etc. Pierre Turquet, who was one of the first if not the first psychoanalyst/group analyst to study large groups, used to say that a group who was larger than 16 should be considered “large”, because this was the maximum number of people who one person could keep in mind during a given period of time, as seen, for example, in that 16 was the number of pieces on a chess team. I once suggested to him that this might be increased to 32, because two teams were involved. He answered me in silence. Although Pat de Maré stressed that approximately 12 to 36 people should be regarded as a “median group”, Lionel Kreeger asked whether such groups were really “small” large groups or “large” small groups. I tend to think that once it is necessary to have more than one circle of people who can see and hear one another on a face to face basis, the group should be considered “large”, and from experience I would say that this is approximately 36 people. I wonder whether this has affected the design of rooms in various buildings around the world, rather than the other way around.

2. The dynamics of large groups should not be inferred to other kinds of large groupings, such as organisations and societies. Such social systems have their own dynamics.

3. The purpose of Large Group(s) convened in association with a General Assembly (or another form of general meeting) of an organisation is two-fold: to help bring into consciousness the concerns of the participants in it, which might otherwise interfere with the formal conduct of the meeting; and to help the participants talk openly to one another about matters that are of concern to them without the restraints of a formal Agenda and various Rules of Order. In theory this should help the participants
communicate during the General Assembly in an open, direct and transparent manner, moderate their inevitable frustrations and aggressive feelings during the meeting of the Assembly, and generate ideas to be considered for the Agenda under Any Other Business or ‘A.O.B’ and for the Agenda of the next meeting of the Board, etc. This means that for organisations whose General Assembly meets very infrequently, the Board of Directors are likely to be enabled to take notice of and to understand the current wishes and hopes of the membership to whom they are ultimately responsible.

Of course, the Large Group is intended to be of value to the participants in it beyond helping them participate more effectively in the General Assembly associated with it. For example, participants are likely to gain insights into the development of the organisation, and to hear some of the views of members of the organisation which would otherwise not be expressed.

4. Participation in a Large Group can be therapeutic for the participants in it, at least for those who have particular kinds of problems. For example, some of us have worked in Large Groups with Shoah survivors, refugees, immigrants, etc. The idea behind this has been to address issues that have arisen in crowds, mass movements, wars, mass immigration and so forth. This is based on an extension of the aphorism to the effect that in so far as one has been harmed by the group, one can best be healed in the group. Thus, in so far as one has been harmed in a large group, one can “revisit” this experience in a tentative and more controlled way, and get insights into the traumatic experience. In my experience, this is more useful for those who work with such patients than it is for the patients themselves.
5. This approach assumes a notion of ‘unconsciousness’ that is based on a relational field theory of it, which is sensitive to mental representations of the social context of the Large Group, including the organisation in which it is situated. This conceptualisation of unconscious processes includes those processes of the unconscious minds of persons that are usually conceptualised in more traditional, classical ways. People tend to regress in the context of large groups, and, therefore, tend to evince very early phases of unconscious life. In addition, Large Groups tend unconsciously to recapitulate the current struggles of their contextual societies or their regions of the world, such as the Middle East or in Europe. The Large Group might also be permeated by the unconscious dynamics of its organisation. Group analysts call such processes ‘equivalence’. The Large Group might manifest envy, jealousy and competition associated with the ubiquitous struggles of sibling rivalry and family dynamics of the participants in the group. This has been discussed by de Maré in terms of the “wide range of meanings” that is generated in large groups. I personally think that this is a matter of degree. Moreover, once one is aware of such “meanings”, they can readily be observed and experienced in groups of all sizes.

6. The main problem with, or perhaps the main danger to, the application of this approach to convening a Large Group in association with a meeting of an organisation is that the usual dynamics of large groups tend to overwhelm the development of discourse and polylogue within it. This is especially so in Large Groups whose participants already have many sub-groups and even contra-groups which they tend to import into the Large Group itself. Another source of difficulty is the variation in the readiness of the participants to experience the passion of primary processes that are
likely to arise within the group, both within their psychic lives and within their interpersonal relations. In fact, there is always a danger that these processes will be acted out within the affairs of the contextual organisation. However, such processes also present the participants with an opportunity for gaining ‘affective insight’ into the dynamics of the organisation. Actually, they can maximise opportunities for more effective and efficient dynamic administration. However, I have no doubt that Large Groups are so powerful and potentially so overwhelming that they can lead to greater difficulties in organisational life. Therefore, great care must be taken in order to increase the likelihood that Large Groups will be useful rather than harmful, e.g. by organizing didactic events in association with the actual experience of the large group, involving lectures, panel presentations, seminars, etc.

7. Within the tradition of group analysis, psychoanalytical group therapy and group relations, there are several models for convening Large Groups and consulting to them. Among the main features of these models are the following:

1) General ecology: the room and building should provide safe emergency exit, adequate ventilation and optimal temperature, reasonably comfortable seating.

2) Seating arrangements: should the seats be arranged in a spiral formation, or in a circle, or in concentric circles (depending on the size of the group and the space for it)? Ideally, the outer ring(s) of this arrangement should be elevated so that people can see and hear one another; in practice, it is usually very difficult to arrange seating in an amphitheatre style, and
modern audio equipment is rarely available, mainly because the cost of these facilities is so great.

3) The number of convenors or consultants: should the Large Group be convened by one person, or co-convened by two people or even by a small leadership team? The first of these might be called a ‘convenor’, ‘leader’ or ‘consultant’ model; the second might should be called a ‘co-convenor’ or a ‘partner’ model; and the third a ‘prime ministerial/cabinet’ or ‘leadership team’ model.

4) The focus of the interventions by the convenor/consultant(s):

(a) should the interventions be directed towards understanding unconscious impulses, fantasies, phantasies and defences against the realisation of the anxieties associated with them, or directed towards encouraging dialogue and discourse through the expression of support and goodwill, as though the convenor/consultant were the ‘host’ of the meeting? Although the former approach might seem to be more ‘analytical’, and the latter more ‘supportive’, the analysis of denials and disavowals, which are the most primitive defences against the most painful anxieties, such as psychic black holes and fears of annihilation, often require a more supportive approach directed towards maximising a sense of safety and security of the participants. This distinction is of vital importance. Working with denial and disavowal in large groups is really an art form (as it is in smaller groups and even in dyads). This supportive approach is sometimes regarded as typical of the group analytic model.
(b) Should the interventions be directed towards properties of the group system, which can be considered in terms of relational defences against shared, complementary and/or reciprocal anxieties, e.g. basic assumptions, emergent hierarchies, and social defences like collective black holes in the collective memory? This is sometimes regarded as typical of the Tavi model.

(c) Should the intervention be directed towards the typical patterns of personification/valence of roles associated with basic assumptions, for example, with respect to the basic assumption of Incohesion which is so typical of large groups, because of the extent and intensity of regression within it: lone wolves and space cadets (isolates) for aggregation roles, cheer leaders and morale boosters (membership individuals) for massification roles, and many other typical roles and their personifications, such as Herculean stable cleaning and its personification by those who are dominated by omnipotent rescue fantasies, which can be directed towards groups as well as persons?

(d) Should the intervention be influenced by the field theory of the social unconscious, which means in particular being able and willing to recognise and interpret processes of equivalence, which go beyond merely acknowledging the existence of parallel processes? This requires an ability and willingness to work with underlying feelings of helplessness and powerlessness which can be very frightening and demoralising. Although they are magnified and amplified in larger groups, some of these considerations apply to all forms of group work of an analytical kind.
5) Hybrid models.

8. Each model has its own dynamics and, therefore, its own pros and cons for learning about Large Groups and for applied work. Each model can either ameliorate the difficulties of working in Large Groups in the service of the task of learning about them and applying this knowledge, or can make matters worse. However, if the main, explicit and contracted purpose of the Large Group is to provide an opportunity for learning about Large Groups, then the seats should be arranged in a spiral formation. This tends to maximise a sense of newness and personal dislocation associated with a large number of participants who are mostly strangers to one another, and who cannot readily see and hear one another. Alternatively, if the main explicit purpose is to provide a social-psychological space within which the participants can consider in an informal and spontaneous way matters that are of concern to them, the seats should be arranged in a circle or if necessary in concentric circles.

9. Sometimes the choice of model is influenced by the need to maximise knowledge of various languages and local conditions, which in an international organisation involves many languages, nationalities, countries, etc. Sometimes it is a matter of needing to represent in a balanced way the various professional orientations of the membership of the organisation. Sometimes the choice of model is a matter of the orientation, personal taste, and character of who is available for the role of convenor/consultant. All these restraints and constraints emanate from within the organisation who has authorised the large group, although these are often unconscious
to the leadership of the organisation who is ultimately responsible for authorising the large group and its convenorship. In my view, efforts should be made to explicate such processes and to help make them more conscious to all concerned. I regard this to be an element of the consultation process.

10. Beyond the social ecology of the Large Group and the politics of the decision about the purposes of it, my own group analytic style of convening Large Groups and consulting to them, is characterised by accepting the stressful personal tension between interpreting various defences against ‘knowing’ the material that has been repressed, and interpreting a variety of social defences involving normative taciturnity, secrecy and ultimately denial itself. I try to facilitate the emergence of a collective state of mind in which the participants feel sufficiently safe and contained to allow themselves to explore such processes.

11. There is always a need for the convenor/consultant(s) to debrief, which involves sharing and discussing some of the projections that have been made onto and into him. This can be done with a small number of trusted colleagues who are able to understand and to manage their own envy and competition, and to contain their own pleasure at the convenor/consultant’s inevitably increased awareness of his imperfections. Arrangements for this debriefing should be made before the event begins.
Bibliography:

A.K. Rice Institute *Group Relations Readers*


*Group Analysis, 44* (3) 342-345.


   [Reprinted by Karnac in 1994].


1 This paper is a revised version of “Models for convening large groups and consulting to them: An introductory comment in preparation for a large group in association with the Tri-Annual General Assembly of the IAGP in September 2015 in Rovinj, Croatia. The following paragraphs are taken from this paper (August 2015):

I have been invited by the Executive Committee of the IAGP to convene and to consult to a ‘Reflection Group’ which is likely to be ‘large’, to be held in association with the Tri-Annual General Assembly of the International Association of Group Psychotherapy in Rovinj in September 2015. I have agreed with the Executive Committee that the purpose of this Large Reflection Group is to provide a space within which the participants can discuss matters of concern to them, and to reflect on the processes that colour this discussion.
I have also agreed that: English is the official language for communication in the Group; the seating arrangement is in concentric circles; I am the sole convenor of this Large Reflection Group; and the model of convening/consulting is a hybrid one, with a mixture of interpretation, when it seems necessary and desirable, and hosting when this seems to be desirable. Finally, time and space permitting, it might be possible for me to summarise some of the main themes of our reflection, but this depends on my sense of the dynamics of the Group. I said that I would arrange to ‘debrief’ in confidence with a trusted colleague who will not be at the Conference, which is my usual way of working.