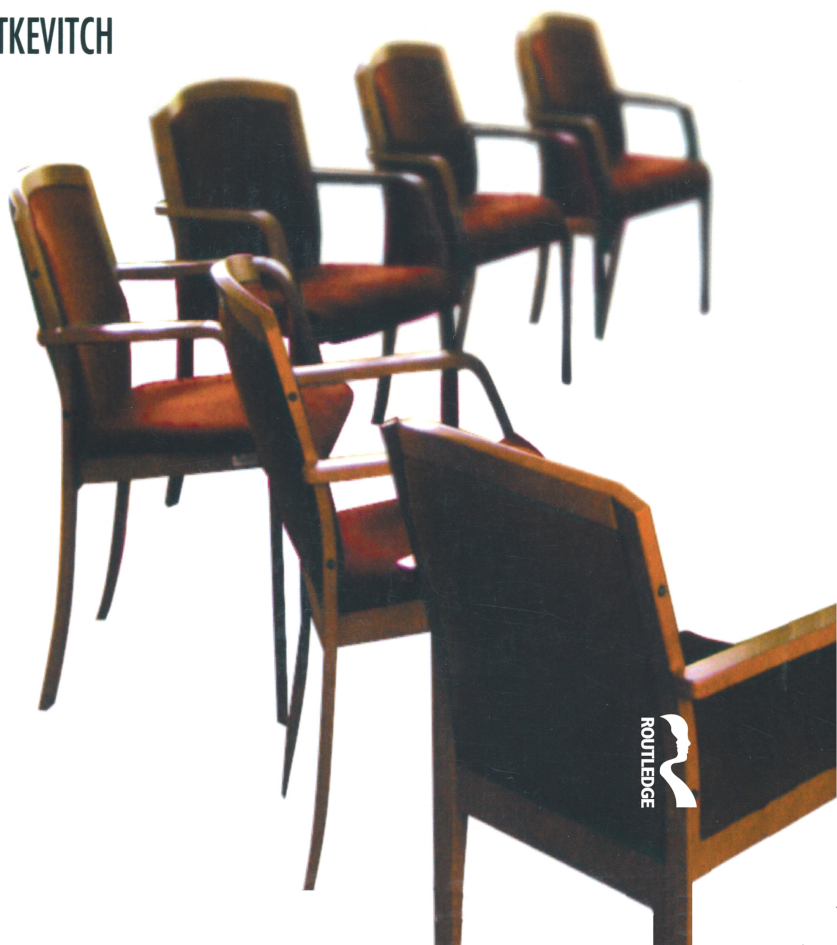


# ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION

Theory, Design and Role-Taking in Group  
Relations Conferences and their Applications

## Volume II

Edited by  
**ELIAT ARAM, ROBERT BAXTER  
AND AVI NUTKEVITCH**



ROUTLEDGE  


# ADAPTATION AND INNOVATION



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Theory, Design and Role-Taking  
in Group Relations Conferences  
and their Applications  
Volume II

*Eliat Aram, Robert Baxter  
and Avi Nutkevitch*

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## *PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS*

This book, the second in an emerging series based on the Belgirate conferences, could not have been written without the devotion to task of numerous people.

We are deeply grateful to all participants who made the journey to the conference and contributed with their feet, experience, thinking and writing to keeping alive the movement of Group Relations theory and practice.

Our special thanks go to the contributors, without whom there wouldn't have been this book, a testimony to the ongoing unravelling creative potential in the Group Relations network;

To Louisa Brunner, our enthusiastic Italian colleague who bridged the language boundary and supported our administrative effort when organising the conference;

To Anne-Marie Kirkpatrick, who contained us by holding the administrative boundary before, during and post the conference, and provided the best of 'good-enough mothering';

To Miri Tzadok, who joined the administrative team during the conference for the invaluable task of containing and managing us, as well as the conference boundaries;

To Mannie Sher, who was a great partner in the decision to mount a second Belgirate conference and in the initial planning of it; and when stepping away from organising and managing the conference and offering it to Eliat, created for us this unique opportunity;

To our institutions—The A. K. Rice Institute, OFEK and The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations—which authorised and supported us in this effort;

To our families, who had to constantly compromise on our attention.

This book includes all papers that were presented at the Belgirate II conference in November 2006. They are divided into three sections according to their focus on adaptations and innovations in theory, design or application, and role taking.

The fourth and final section consists of four post-conference reflections written by participants of the conference.

Avi, Bob and Eliat  
November 2008

## FOREWORD

Almost two decades ago, on a trip to London from my hometown in Perth, Western Australia, I was fortunate to meet the late Eric Miller. Perth is known to be the most isolated capital city in the world, and I expressed to Eric my envy of colleagues in London, who are so close to the nucleus of group relations—the Tavistock Institute. Eric replied wryly that he envied those of us in the Antipodes, far away from institutionalised pressures and with the apparent frontier freedom to explore.

I think he would have been stirred by the exciting developments and explorations that have emanated from the institutional heart of group relations, and which are so robustly evident in the Belgirate conferences and the gathering of group relations representatives from around the globe.

I feel very privileged to have been invited by the editors of the book to write this foreword. The breadth and depth of original and creative thought about, and application of, group relations theory, design, role-taking and application that I see in this book is a clear embodiment of its core theme, ‘innovation and adaptation’.

In a Festschrift on the 65th birthday of Gouranga Chattopadhyay, I published a somewhat impassioned plea for the application of this inspired framework to the exploration of authority, leadership and organisation to the social and political world. I have, in the past, wondered what factors have constrained group relations work from deeply penetrating new arenas such as the corporate world and also the socio-political sphere. What boundary conditions might have restrained its proponents?

Although the authors in this volume may be seen to represent group relations in England, Israel, Australia, the USA, Italy, South Africa, India, the Netherlands, and Greece, it is clear from these fascinating chapters that representation is never simple. On the contrary, what is revealed is the complexity of 'boundaries' of identity, geography, sexuality, race, religion, and ethnicity, among other elements that weave into the fabric of Belgirate II and group relations internationally. Perhaps one of the key motifs to emerge from this book is the critical examination of what constitutes a 'boundary', and, by implication, whether—and how—adaptation and innovation involve boundary violation, penetration, expansion, destruction, or creation.

The exploration of the theme of 'adaptation and innovation' also draws vital attention to the exacting, complex and paradoxical nature of the evolution of group relations: continually adapting to what is 'known' inside and outside assumed boundaries. At the same time, challenging them, venturing into the unknown and, indeed, into the realm of the unknowable. This is the primary challenge exemplified in this volume.

Dr Allan Shafer  
Clinical Psychologist and Socio-analyst  
January 2009

## ABOUT THE EDITORS AND CONTRIBUTORS

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**Eliat Aram**, PhD, is the Director of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, which she leads through a new phase of change and growth. A practising chartered psychologist (BPS)—British Psychological Society and a UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy) registered psychotherapist and supervisor, with interests in team/organisational development and transformation, diversity and multiculturalism, she consults and coaches drawing on group relations theory and practice, systems psychodynamics, Gestalt therapy theory, and Complexity theory. She also works as a staff member on group relations conferences regularly nationally and internationally, and has directed the Tavistock Institute's group relations conference 'Authority, Role and Organisation' (the 'Leicester' conference) since 2007. She was born and raised in Israel and lives in London with her husband and two children.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Adaptation and innovation: Theory, design and role-taking in group relations conferences and their applications

*Eliat Aram, Robert Baxter and Avi Nutkevitch*

*From two to three sponsoring institutions:  
From the personal duo to the organisational trio*

When Avi Nutkevitch and Mannie Sher got together after the first conference at Belgirate ended, in November 2003, they felt that the conference was successful in providing a space full of potential for emerging ideas and advancing the theory of Group Relations Conferences and their applications. It was then that they began the conversation around offering a second conference of this nature, perhaps three years later, to provide a space for the emerging international Group Relations network to continue working on relevant tasks.

Whereas Avi and Mannie's collaboration was institutional (OFEK and the Tavistock Institute), its origin was personal to a great degree, based on familiar inter-organisational and individual connections. A key question that emerged for them had to do with the temptation of institutional possessiveness versus the value of institutional generosity. Would they hold on to the 'patent' initiated through their personal authority, fed by the institutional authority

of the Tavistock Institute and OFEK? Or would they open the boundaries of institutional authority (which we know is inherently unstable) and share the success they experienced as organisers of the first Belgirate conference by including a larger segment of the global network of GR organizations in the process of maintaining and taking forward this enterprise?

In parallel another question that emerged from the conference dynamics for the pragmatic Avi and Mannie was regarding the place of the large American GR contingency. In reflecting on these questions they thought it useful to consider the A.K. Rice Institute, the largest GR organisation in the world, as the third sponsor for the development of the second conference in Belgirate and as a likely candidate for increasing the participation of the American GR practitioners in this conference.

The move from two partner organisations to three symbolised the transition from the personal, yet not private, connection that gave birth to the first conference for GR practitioners to an international cross-institutional collaboration of persons-in-role.

A formal invitation was then issued to the president of AKRI, Bob Baxter, and its Board of Directors authorised him to hold an exploratory meeting with Avi and Mannie.

The three men met in February 2005, following which they then formally agreed to collaborate in working towards the task of providing a space for furthering GR international work for the second time in Belgirate in November 2006. They were all authorised by their respective institutions, and this collaboration was supported by a formal Memorandum of Agreement between AKRI, OFEK and the Tavistock Institute (TI).

Another change awaited the trio however. After that February, Mannie Sher, struggling under an increasing workload, wrote an email to the other two one day in June to say that he proposed a change to the management. He couldn't invest the time required to participate in this production but a newcomer to the TI, his colleague Eliat Aram, was willing and able to take this on.

So now, with Eliat Aram coming on board the Belgirate II management became gender mixed, cross generational and more formally a representation of this unique cross institutional collaboration among organisations that, to our knowledge, have never collaborated in this way before.

The three of us established regular telephone-conference calls which provided the space for all of the pre-conference work.

One of the first decisions we took was for AKRI to take up the leading administrative function, which included handling the budget for the conference the registration and payments. The only area where we found that the personal still prevailed was in liaison with the Hotel Villa Carlotta in Italy, where the owner paid little attention to anyone but Avi and, to a lesser degree, to Anne-Marie Kirkpatrick, one of the administrators.

While we joked and still joke about this, there might be some insight here to do with cultural and inter-cultural dialogue and connection. In addition, the Italian hotel owner's connection was with Avi, as if he knew—unconsciously—that OFEK symbolises the partner organisation that holds the authority for the history and the genesis of these conferences.

So, OFEK through Avi held the history of the Belgirate conferences; AKRI through Bob and Anne-Marie held the financial aspects of this enterprise; and Eliat—well, with her arrival we began to deal with the complexities of the history and tradition as represented through the Tavistock Institute at the same time as she, being a younger female newcomer to the TI, brought a sense of freedom to experiment with tradition and expand the boundaries of the GR network.

As we write about our experience of working together, we find it quite interesting. Two of us had never met before (Eliat and Bob); two of us had worked together once before (Avi and Eliat); and two met before in one or two conferences in NYC that they can't recall in the same way (Bob and Avi). Nevertheless, we have established a very satisfying working relationship, task-focused and clear on purpose, which was sustained throughout the conference and its dynamics. We had no director although we worked with Avi as convenor of the management based on his authority of history, but our decision making was joint and collaborative. Our experience of each other was one of trust and generosity; it was open and often filled with humour.

### *How come it worked?*

We believe that before and during the conference we represented movement: across age, ideas, traditions, succession. We came together fully authorised by our organisations to carry out the task of putting



together this conference, and we were committed to working on this task with full and authentic collaboration.

We still hold as true our sense that the GR international network will only survive through collaboration, generosity of sharing and joint innovation and application. Despite the conference competitive and envious dynamics that are always part of this kind of work, the system-as-a-whole had the desire for this conference to succeed in providing the space for the GR network to grow and deepen.

This brings us to a key question in this chapter, namely to do with understanding the emerging **identity** of this enterprise, which we refer to as the Belgirate conferences.

*Identity in relation to the Belgirate conferences:  
The notion of “organizational identity”*

The notion of organizational identity is a complex one that has been an emerging and interesting area of exploration and articulation in the last 25 years (Hatch & Schultz, 2004). We will not get into an extensive review of this notion, but highlight a few points that will provide a conceptual framework for our delineation of what we consider to be some important elements of the Belgirate conferences’ identity.

The notion of identity of an organization or an enterprise (like the Belgirate conferences) answers the questions “who are we?” or “what do we want to be?” Concurrently the external world carries notions, images, phantasies, wishes, projections and projective identifications that are related to the questions “who are they?” or “what do they want to be?” Thus from a Socio-Psychological-Organizational perspective, the concept of identity is understood in relational terms. We assume that these two sets of images and definitions—the internal ones and the external ones—are reciprocally influencing each other, both consciously and unconsciously, and are thus related to the formation and development of the organizational identity. An organizational identity is a dynamic process that evolves and devolves over time and can be a source of some stability and coherence for those who depend on it. Hatch and Schultz (2004) offer a model where a formulation of an organizational identity is based on three sets of criteria: those related to the organization’s **central character**; those related to the organization’s **distinctiveness**; and those related to the organization’s **temporal continuity**. However,

there is no one objective way of defining what a “central character” is or what elements of “distinctiveness” or “temporal continuity” entail. There are endless aspects of an organization that can be related to its identity. In the literature on this subject, we find references to the organization’s goals, culture, tasks, values, vision, membership, geographical location, ideology, and products or output, to mention a few. In group relations language we might talk about various **boundaries**: of primary task, of time, of territory, of membership, of structure and design, of ways of taking up roles, etc. Yet different people within or outside of the organization might define or interpret these things differently. The various elements related to the above are therefore not objective. They are related to the context and purpose of defining it, hence to conscious and unconscious dynamics of power and political agendas.

The way an organization’s identity is defined and perceived by its management and members influences continuously its decisions both in the short and in the long run.

Organizational identity is therefore a heuristic concept—like a primary task—that serves as a compass for structuring, designing, managing and planning for the future.

Now, after a second Belgirate conference we feel we are in a place where describing some aspects of what transpired in the Belgirate II conference can be understood in relation to or in the context of the **emerging identity** of the Belgirate conferences as an organization or enterprise in-the-mind<sup>1</sup> (Armstrong, 2005).

*Elements in the Belgirate conferences identity:  
Issues of place, time, participants, primary task, design,  
role taking and their meanings*

*Place and time*

Clearly, the Belgirate conferences’ identity is integrally related to space and time. The practical, rational reasoning of the location and the three years gap have an underlying meaning related to human beings attachment to the place where things have happened before and influence the developing psyche of the conferences through the rhythm of every three years return. This attachment may be understood differently from different perspectives, but we believe

that naming the conference Belgirate II and hence making a strong connection to the place where the event takes place, and having it return to this place periodically, has meanings which are linked to experiencing an evolving tradition, history and roots, emerging identity and also spiritual associations (e.g. 'coming back' to a 'promised land', 'holy', place of worship' etc.)

Holding the Belgirate conferences in Italy regularly adds to the symbolism of a place in time which is a 'neutral' territory, or at least, not as contested as would be the homeland of any of the three sponsoring institutions.

### *The participants*

As was true for the first Belgirate conference, Belgirate II was designed for people who had held staff roles—directorial, consultative and/or administrative—in Group Relations conferences. This was an important aspect of the conference's identity, and it created a boundary that had to be managed. In the end, two applications to participate were rejected because the individuals indicated that they had had no staff role experience. However, given the fact that we had decided to take people's statements on their applications at face value, we did have at least one participant who had not taken up a staff role, despite stating otherwise on the application.

Delineating and managing this boundary around participation created a boundary around a subgroup of individuals associated with, and interested in, Group Relations. In drawing and holding this boundary, dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, of being chosen or rejected, emerged and carried a world of associations and fantasies in the life of the conference. Some of these are addressed by writers in the Post-conference Reflections section of the book.

In the pre-conference phase, the registration process was remarkably different from that experienced in many experiential Group Relations conferences around the globe today. Rather than being anxious about the sufficiency of participants, the Management Team ultimately had to struggle with the problem of space limitations. By the end of the early registration period, 95% of the total participants had registered for the conference, and in the weeks just prior to the conference, there was a waiting list of 14 individuals, three of whom were finally able to attend.

In total, 86 individuals, inclusive of the Management (3) and Administrative (2) Teams, participated in the conference. They represented 11 countries (Australia, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Italy, the Netherlands, South Africa, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States). One other person (from India) had to withdraw at the last minute. Of the participants, 46 had previously directed Group Relations conferences, 79 had served in consultant roles and 37 had administered one or more Group Relations conferences. Five individuals had taken up administrative roles exclusively.

The age distribution among the participants was of interest. Two did not indicate their age, but of the others, only 16 were younger than 50. Three were 70 or older; 32 were aged 60–69; 33 were aged 50–59; 15 were aged 40–49; and one person was aged 30–39. This distribution poses questions about where the younger generation of Group Relations practitioners is and how to include these individuals in future events such as this.

Many of the participants took up specific roles during the conference. Fourteen individuals presented papers while 10 others chaired their presentations. Two of the participants served as convenors for the morning reflections and associations events. The Management Team included the three of us, and the Administrative Team included Anne Marie Kirkpatrick and Miri Tzadok; collectively, we referred to ourselves as the MATS. In total, 31 participants held specifically authorized roles during the conference. This reflected an element of the culture and identity of the conference: the fact that this was a meeting of colleagues, created by a small group but implemented and sustained through collective participation. Perhaps the best analogy is that of an extended family dinner party; the Management Team planned and hosted, but did not direct, the event as would be expected in a group relations conference.

### *The primary task*

We stated in the brochure that the primary task of this conference was:

*To provide opportunities to learn about and explore innovations and adaptations in theory, design and role taking in GR conferences and their applications.*