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The Dynamics of Lateral Relations in Changing Organizational Worlds¹

David Armstrong

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to chart ways in which a number of linked but independent changes in the organizational contexts clients are bringing with them into consultancy are both drawing attention to and forcing us to reconsider ways in which we have hitherto thought about the dynamics of leadership, accountability, and authority. It proposes that one way of characterizing this direction of movement is that it is focusing around the experiences, challenges and dilemmas, both conscious and unconscious, being presented by lateral relations. The paper offers a provisional definition of 'lateral relations' and seeks to explore and test this against experiences in two consultancy assignments, in the private and public sectors, respectively. Both touch on themes of anxiety and vulnerability: in the dismantling of prior expectations and assumptions, and in the face of what might be termed the nakedness of being on one's own, with colleagues. The concluding section of the paper speculates on ways in which these developments may both challenge and affect our more familiar organizational and group relations paradigms.

Key words: Vertical and lateral relations, sibling dynamics, distributed leadership, sameness and difference, existential anxiety, lateral authority, hierarchy, self regulated teams, internal agency.

There are occasions in the work we do, whether as psychologists, group relations practitioners or organizational consultants, when we seem to encounter something new that may challenge our present ways of thinking about and formulating our own and our clients' experience.

These moments, in my own experience, owe less to internally generated changes in ourselves than to unanticipated shifts or changes, either in the population of patients or clients we chance to meet, or in the contexts they bring with them into the consulting room.

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In this paper I try to describe how a number of recent or relatively recent changes in the organizational contexts clients are bringing with them into consultancy within my own service are both drawing attention to and forcing us to reconsider or reframe some of the ways in which we have hitherto thought about the dynamics of leadership, management, and authority.

One way of characterizing this direction of movement is that it is focusing around the experiences, challenges, and dilemmas, both conscious and unconscious, being presented by lateral relations.

For the time being I shall define lateral relations as: 'a relation between collaborating persons, role holders, groups or teams that is unmediated by any actual or assumed hierarchical authority'.²

This definition is, however, at best provisional. Outside the sphere of personal relations, e.g., friendship, it is an open question, perhaps, whether at least in the unconscious, any such relation truly exists. And this is something we may later wish to explore.

Before taking this further, I want to mention a kind of parallel, apparently unrelated, direction of movement that is happening within psychoanalysis: namely an emerging preoccupation with the dynamics of sibling relationships. Within the last five years, Juliet Mitchell and Prophecy Coles, in particular, have both, though in different ways, argued that psychoanalysis has tended to neglect the significance of sibling relationships as an element within psychic development that may have a trajectory independent or partly independent of the 'vertical relationship between self and parents' (Coles, 2003; Mitchell, 2004).

In a recent paper written for a collection published under the title *Sibling Relationships*, edited by Prophecy Coles, Robert Hinshelwood and Gary Winship have this to say:

To come to this point, psychoanalysis has traversed a long social journey. In the early days professional expertise was given high authority and status and resulted in a wide differential of power and status between analyst and patient. Transference in a psychoanalytic treatment naturally orbited around hierarchical relations. Today, professional expertise is being removed from professional life; authority is increasingly invested in the evidence of science rather than the experience of persons. This new location of authority could set psychoanalysis free to explore egalitarian, lateral childhood relations. They could intrude more visibly into the transference-countertransference setting, beside or instead of the vertical ones of parental authority. (Hinshelwood and Winship, 2006, p. 77)

I am not sure how far I would go along with all of Hinshelwood's and Winship's account of the context in which this new focus on

sibling relationships has evolved. However, the parallel with what we are being presented with in a more organizational context is certainly striking, and later in the paper I explore ways in which this strand of psychoanalytic thinking may help to illuminate the dynamics of lateral relations in organizational settings, as these are emerging in my own and my colleagues' consultancy practices both transferentially and countertransferentially.

So, just how are these dynamics emerging and in what contexts? I want to offer two particular examples, one from the private sector and one from the public sector. The contexts are, in fact, quite different, though the dynamics in play have more than a passing resemblance. Both touch on themes of anxiety and vulnerability, in the dismantling of prior expectations and assumptions, both conscious and unconscious, and in the face of what might be termed the nakedness of being on one's own, with colleagues.

REINVENTING LEADERSHIP IN A MULTI-NATIONAL ENTERPRISE: A STEP TOO FAR?

Some years ago, I was invited to take part, with a team of eight consultants brought together by an American colleague, in a major assignment with one division of a large multi-national pharmaceutical company.

The division in question had been set up with responsibility for the marketing, sale, and distribution of pharmaceutical products within a variety of regions and countries across the world, which had hitherto been loosely linked together and in each of which it was felt that potential market opportunities had yet to be fully exploited.

The president of the division, a highly intelligent, thoughtful, and charismatic leader, was a client of the American colleague I have referred to, who was also working with a number of other senior and middle managers within the division.

Early on in their consulting contract, the president had referred to his expressed interest or ambition to crack the challenge of 'how to manage international operations'. He was aware that the various operating regions constituting the division, each headed by a vice president, presented some similar but some quite different dilemmas and challenges. These in part reflected differences in social, political, economic, and cultural contexts; in the nature of the medical economy, its needs, processes, and patterns of prescribing; and in part associated differences in the ways business was conducted, the levers of influence, channels of distribution or communication, etc. Moreover, many of the regions themselves comprised a variety of

different countries, each of which was characterized by its own particular opportunities and constraints.

Given this variety, the president saw that it was not sensible to seek to determine, craft, and drive operational strategies and decisions top-down. Rather, the challenge was to evolve ways of transforming how the enterprise and its senior group together thought about and operationalized what might be referred to as the management of contextual diversity.

The president's approach to this transformational challenge appeared both straightforward and risky. (For reasons I touch on later I am not sure just how clear and unambiguous his thinking was at the outset and maybe he was not so sure himself. Certainly this was the view of his senior team.)

Put simply, the guts of this transformation were to decouple the centre and the periphery: that is, to enhance and promote the autonomy of the regions, decentralize support functions and make them accountable to the regional vice presidents, reduce dependency on the president himself, and more generally alleviate hierarchies and enhance flexible team work across the whole organization. At the same time there were other anticipated benefits in view, including a strengthening of corporate accountability and a release of synergy, as different regions and managers experimented with and evolved new ways of penetrating and exploiting market opportunities.

Later, the consultants brought together in the assignment were to describe what the president and his senior executives were attempting as the 'co-management' of the enterprise, (an early version perhaps of what is now often referred to as 'distributed leadership').

It was at this stage that the American colleague I have mentioned conceived and sold to the president the idea of what he termed a 'role consultation team'. This would consist of a number of colleagues, most of whom had a similar approach to organizational consultancy, both American and European. The idea was that each consultant would pair up with one or other vice president (both line and staff) and work with them in role consultancy. This would afford an opportunity to explore and work through the transformational and developmental challenges in view. The consultant team would in turn liaise with each other, in virtual or real space, to share perspectives and seek to develop an overview of what was emerging. They would also occasionally meet with and participate in quarterly management meetings of the whole senior team and might, too, if a vice president so requested, work with his or her team of managing directors, either individually or again in their whole team meetings.

So, what transpired, how did the work progress, what were the

issues we found ourselves facing, and what light may these throw on the theme of lateral relations?

I do not have the space, nor am I sure I would know how, to tell the whole story. Indeed, one of the difficulties the consultant team seemed to have (though this is clearer now, after the event, than at the time) was that the attempt to piece together a 'whole story' so flooded us with narrative detail and complexity that it became difficult to see the wood for the trees. One might suggest that trying to construct a whole story was serving as a defence against interpretatively chancing one's arm. (I return to the possible significance of this later on.)

Rather, I want to focus on two linked elements within the story: one concerned with the relations between vice presidents and president; one with relations across the senior team as a whole. Both, I believe, may serve to illustrate something of the psychological difficulties in making the transition from a vertical to a more horizontal paradigm, particularly in a business context of considerable turbulence, uncertainty and competitive challenge.

With regard to the relation between vice presidents and president, a typical scenario was this. A vice president (my own client, for example) would seek to use the president to ask his advice on particular strategic options or challenges he was experiencing. The president would not directly offer such advice. It was up to my client to make his own best judgement on the ground. On other occasions, however, the president would challenge one or other decision that the same vice president had made, or would complain of something he had not been informed about. For the vice presidents as a whole, the locus of leadership became experienced as ambiguous: the president, as it were, simultaneously distributing leadership downwards – 'you are fully authorized to act' – and then taking it back.

Within the consultant team there was less than full agreement on how to read what was happening. For some, this ambiguity did indeed reflect 'a lack of clarity between the president and his direct reports', which then 'cascaded through (other) parts of the system, duplicated by regional managers to country managers and country managers to their direct reports'. But this overlooked the possibility that such an ambiguity might itself be intrinsic to what the president was attempting. Or, to put it another way, that in authorizing the vice presidents to back their own judgements, the president was not simply abdicating or withdrawing his responsibilities for keeping informed, monitoring, or challenging from his own role perspective.

The vice presidents were experiencing the ambiguity around leadership as a tension that needed to be resolved. But it could also be

seen as a tension that needed not so much to be resolved as continually managed; that there might be no single answer to the questions 'what is the extent of our authorization?', or 'just where does authority for decision lie?' Rather, these questions might have to be continually negotiated and tested. They could not be bound by formal rules, procedures, ideas of sovereignty or equity. Any answer could only be performative, for here and now.

I suggest the vice presidents were caught on the horns of a psychological dilemma, consciously and unconsciously. To be able to respond to the president's transformational intent, they needed to be able to dismantle their previous expectations of, and investments in, his leadership. Many of them had quite strong personal relations with the president, who had been both boss and mentor, unconsciously carrying for them something of a parental role. (In fact this parental construct was often quite close to the surface, expressed in a phrase members of the consultant team sometimes found themselves voicing: 'Jack and his boys'.)

Dismantling previous expectations and investments did not, however, imply dismantling the president's own continuing leadership role. It was as if the vice presidents were construing the only alternative to dependence *on* as independence *from*: being on one's own, or running one's own show. I suggest that this implicit construct was serving as a defence against the feelings of vulnerability and exposure associated with a more lateral, distributed concept of leadership, in which the decisions one takes are always open to review and challenge, as it were, from the boundary of the enterprise as a whole, which is the boundary on which the president, day in day out, necessarily stands and on which he is inviting his colleagues to stand.

A year into the assignment, the consultant team had an opportunity to shift perspective from working with individual members of the senior team to working with the team as a whole. The context was a team 'retreat', held near the company's headquarters but off site, to which the consultants were invited, both to observe and to give feedback to the client in reviewing progress and addressing a number of issues highlighted over the past year's work.

In preparation for this meeting, the consultants had written an extended memorandum on their work to date, together with a number of suggested 'topics for discussion', though I think it was agreed in a meeting with the president beforehand that this would not be circulated to the team in advance. (Looking back, I think this document was a good example of the kind of narrative overkill I referred to earlier.)

The meeting proved exceptionally challenging and often difficult, both for the team and for the consultants. Some time earlier, when

the consultants had met together, as we said 'to synthesize our experiences', they had invited the president to join them at one stage. He had then disarmingly kicked off by saying, 'I realize that we don't know what we're doing and you don't know what you're doing.' I think it would be fair to say that this retreat at times more than confirmed his observation.

What I want to pick out from the experience, more particularly, is the great difficulty that both the senior managers and the consultants had in realizing, making real, the idea of being 'a team'. At one point in the meeting the question was addressed head on: was this group a team or not? After some discussion someone suggested, 'We are not so much a team, more a circle of pairs.' At one level one might have taken this, drawing from a familiar Group Relations perspective, as giving expression to an implicit pairing culture or valency: the mobilization of expectancy around the new enterprise. This, incidentally, might be taken also as linked to an emotional undertow associated with the nature of the business itself: the marketing and sale of drugs. More realistically, there was evidence from outside the team meeting of a greater cross fertilization of ideas and resources, for example 'two regional managers (VPs) working together to investigate alternative ways of achieving work and opening markets'.

However, in the context of the meeting, as one observed the to and fro of discussion it began to seem more that the imagery of a 'circle of pairs' was serving rather to disguise what in effect were a series of paired relations between each member and the President, like the spokes of a wheel in relation to the hub.

This accorded with and picked up on something noted by the consultant team previously, that goes back to what I mentioned earlier about the personal relations between the president and some if not all members of the team. In the memorandum prepared by the consultants in advance of the meeting, discussing the issue of how authority was being exercised, we had written

Jack's leadership can lead individuals to sometimes feel that his/her authority is based more on one's relationship to Jack rather than one's competence. This creates a heightened sense of vulnerability, as accountability may depend more on the extent of one's personal ties than being anchored in one's role and task performance. . . . The existence of sub groups of individuals who experience themselves as being closer to or more authorized by Jack can create tensions between members of those groups and individuals who do not experience themselves to be authorized through interpersonal closeness. This can create a dynamic in the entire group that inhibits collaborative work and fosters envy and competitive dynamics.

However, I do not think now that this emphasis on relations with the president really meets or met the challenge of the case. An alternative view would be that the preoccupation with relations to the president was serving rather as a *defence* against, and not as an *explanation* of, what was inhibiting collaborative work, fostering envy and competitive dynamics. The 'heightened sense of vulnerability', on this view, was not so much accounted for as displaced on to personal relations with the president, precisely to avoid having to acknowledge the issues of competence and anxiety necessarily generated in the attempted move from a vertical to a more horizontal paradigm, where feelings of vulnerability may have as much or more to do with fears of exposure, nakedness to one's peers.

I think the consultant team missed this possible dynamic at the time. And I think we missed it because we were unable to make constructive use of our own team countertransference. Because the fact was that within the meeting we ourselves were experiencing dynamics that exactly mirrored those of our clients. Were we a group, a team, a circle of pairs, spokes in a wheel relating to the originator and holder of the account, who was himself paired with the president in role consultation? Certainly there were issues of competence around, anxiety about how one's own client was performing in the meeting, a sense of being under exposure to one's clients and to each other. And none of us, I think, had ever been involved previously in an assignment of quite this stature or complexity.

I do not think we were able, under the pressure, to work with this countertransferential undertow in a way that might have enabled us to feed something back. And after this meeting the consultant team rather fell apart, some members dropping off, or ending their individual contract with clients, or being unable to resolve sharp differences in how they were working.

Those of us who remained, I think, did 'good enough work', but more on an individual than a collective level. Two years on, in an exchange of reflective e-mails, one of us was to write: 'Speaking for myself, I experience the success of my work individually, not as a part of, or reflective of, a collective experience and effort. I feel my work in an individual way, as if there were no team.'

SAMENESS AND DIFFERENCE: THE BURDEN OF THE LATERAL³

The *OED* defines lateral as 'existing or moving side by side'. It sounds rather promising, as in 'marching side by side' or 'standing side by side'. But these constructions have an implicit group connotation:

marching *against* something or standing *for* something, in which differences are subsumed under a shared sense of sameness. In the kind of lateral construct I have tried to describe through this example, the issue is, rather, how to reconcile the sense of sameness with the acknowledgement of differences, differences that are not neatly contained within a tightly differentiated structure of roles and responsibilities and touch inevitably on matters of individual competence, flair, capacity to take risks, to influence or persuade. Hence, such differences necessarily are likely to arouse feelings of rivalry and envy, guilt and shame.

This links, I think, to some of the ideas and observations emerging from the work on sibling relationship referred to earlier in the paper. For example, in a dissertation written by Jacqueline Sirota at the University of the West of England, 'The social and political expression of sibling relationships', in the course of a discussion around Freud's description of the 'primal horde', she notes:

In 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego' Freud describes how the leader/Primal Father can act as the ego ideal of the group. . . . The apparent abdication of personhood that this relationship entails (may) also serve to avoid the complex emotional states of rivalry, love and hate in the lateral relationships of the 'brothers'. Are these peer relationships so difficult to think about and manage that we give ourselves so readily to a leader or ideal who will take the burden away? (Sirota, 2003).

I do not want to force the analogy, but, as I indicated, there clearly was evidence within the senior management team I have been describing of a strong psychological investment in the president that threatened to get in the way of a more personal taking up of authority. And within the team setting, the apparent preoccupation with relations to the president, though it certainly did not dissolve feelings of competitiveness and rivalry, did serve to channel these in a direction that obscured, and might unconsciously have been intended to obscure, their real origin. It is as if the team mobilized the vertical dynamic to avoid the true 'burden' of its lateral counterpart.

DE-CONSTRUCTING AND RE-CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY: THE DYNAMICS OF PARTNERSHIP

At the outset of the paper I offered as a provisional definition of lateral relations 'a relation between collaborating persons role holders, groups or teams that is unmediated by any actual or assumed hierarchical authority'. While I think the example I have given goes some way to illustrate the difficulties that may attend attempts to

operationalize such a definition, it could also be said, with justice, that the example necessarily fails to match the requirement.

Clearly, vertical relations did still, in external reality, continue to exist. The president remained the overall head of the enterprise, and as such was personally accountable to the parent company's executive board, of which he was himself a member. He might seek on occasion to function rather as a kind of *primus inter pares*, but elsewhere or in other respects he was still boss, line manager, and appraiser over his direct reports. One might picture the situation as resembling the figure illusions I remember being intrigued by as a young psychology student: now it's a duck, now a rabbit; now an old maid, now a young girl. This double face of the president's relation to the team must have helped to compound the psychological complexities members of the team were facing.

One might contrast this with the rather different situation relating to recent developments in the public sector, which arise out of the introduction and development of partnership or multi-agency working groups or teams, that cut across existing organizational boundaries: health and social services, statutory and voluntary agencies, etc. In these cases there simply is no one vertical overarching body or boundary in view, though I think what might be termed our cultural distrust or anxiety around lateral relations contributes to the emergence of surrogates for such bodies, in the guise of commissioning and performance management arrangements, the increasing preoccupation with externally driven targets and/or governance requirements.

In a recent paper by Clare Huffington, Kim James and myself, commenting on some of the dilemmas presented by the introduction of partnership working for managers of the constituent agencies involved, we refer to a tendency:

for two opposing difficulties to arise. One is that partners get so preoccupied with their own reading (explicit or more likely implicit) of the nature and/or requirements of the work that 'partnership' cannot get off the ground. The other is that the energy or commitment released in partnership leads to a watering down or abandonment of real differences related to the nature of the work. One way of expressing the appropriate dynamic of partnership is that it turns on the ability to contest with the other, without this deteriorating into conflict or being evaded as a way of dealing with fear of conflict. The danger is of stimulating a pairing valency designed partly to keep fight/flight or dependency at bay. (Huffington et al., 2004, p. 76).

In what follows I shall briefly consider the dilemmas and challenges of such arrangements from the perspective not of managers

of the constituent partner organizations involved, but rather of the front line groups or teams that have been brought together under this umbrella.

The organizational positioning of such teams is, to say the least, awkward. Their members are employed by different organizations or agencies; professional supervision is often external to the team, carried by agency staff who may themselves have little experience of partnership working; there are different and potentially contentious rates of pay and service conditions; lines of accountability are confused and confusing; team leadership is often ambiguous. And all this in a context in which the fear of potential risks and/or the preoccupation with centrally driven targets may foster intrusive attempts at micro management from one or other outside party.

Fairly recently, I was invited to undertake an assignment with one such team, which I will refer to as 'A & B'. A & B had been set up to offer a multi-agency, multi-disciplinary service for children, their families and carers who were seen to have mental health needs. Their work covered a variety of short-term provision including assessment, therapeutic support, work with both children and families, and liaison with other specialist provision in both the statutory and voluntary sector. Members of the team included senior practitioners, field social workers, child psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and psychologists. Some were on full-time contracts, some on part-time contracts, and all continued to have employment and professional links to one or other parent organization.

The assignment was initially to provide training input to the team on approaches to consultancy. This was an aspect of their work that it was felt they could further develop, in helping other agencies think about their cases and how they were working. The first two meetings with the team focused on this aspect and the skills that might need to be further developed, including exercises in which team members individually or in pairs presented issues arising in their own work, with other members working with myself as a 'reflecting team'. Both meetings seemed to go pretty well, but after the second meeting it was suggested that what the team really needed and would welcome was a consultation to itself.

It was not clear to me at the time just what lay behind this proposed change of focus. During the 'reflecting team' exercises it had emerged that there were real problems of communication in the team; for example, different members working with the same family or in liaison with the same or related services, but apparently unaware of what each was doing. Questions were also being raised about the team's remit, its limits and priorities. At the same time

there seemed to be unresolved issues around leadership within the team. The agency manager, who had commissioned the assignment on behalf of the team and had expected to take part, was never able to be present. In her absence the team seemed somewhat rudderless, expectant but uncertain and anxious about its direction (features that might also echo, or resonate with, the situation of its clients and/or their referrers). Perhaps consultancy was being seen as a surrogate for an absent management, the previous sessions having been turned into something like a trial run: was I up to the task?

During what followed I met with the team, initially in two half-day sessions, working to an open agenda, as team members shared their experiences together. For some time the team seemed pre-occupied with grumbles and frustrations around its external management arrangements; sometimes the felt absence of one or other agency manager, sometimes the intrusive interference of another. Alternatively, there might be grumbles about the commissioning body and/or about the different and sometimes conflicting expectations of referrers. One had the impression of a team caught within a network of bodies and agencies working to different agendas, out of communication with each other, with no *shared* view of what they wanted from the team or how they conceived its task.

At some point it became apparent, not only, I think, to myself, but also to the team members, that however apt these grumbles and frustrations might be, they were also serving to deflect attention from an undertow of uncertainty concerning and within the team itself. To recall the first example, one might take this movement in the team, at least in part, as the displacement of a lateral dynamic upwards, in this instance through a kind of coming together or 'ganging up' in a shared hostility to management: in group relations terms fight/flight as a response to failed dependence.

But what then was it exactly that was being displaced? In discussing the first example, I suggested that one way of characterizing the underlying issue within the team of vice presidents was 'how to reconcile the sense of sameness with the acknowledgement of differences'. In this case, however, the issue might rather be seen as 'how to reconcile the sense of difference with the acknowledgement of sameness'.

Just what does this mean? The team, as I saw it, newly set up, located within an inter-organizational space, with few parallels elsewhere, is faced with the task of having to create a skin around itself. I want to refer to this as a 'boundary of identity', by which I mean some shared view not only of its task, but of its practice: its particular ways of understanding and responding to what Philip Boxer has

referred to as its clients' 'context of use'.⁴ The preoccupation with external management arrangements, etc., represents a way of avoiding this task through projection on to others, who are seen as falling short, equivalent to the 'abdication of personhood' involved in setting up the leader/primal father as the group's 'ego ideal'.

What is it, then, that drives this projection upwards? This was to emerge more clearly as the team members shifted focus from outwards to inwards, moving to identify and table what they needed to address. On the one hand the issue of identity was directly named:

'Who is A & B and what do we do?'
'What do we offer and how do we work together?'

On the other hand the issue of difference arose:

'What are the differences between us: the cultures we bring with us? Are they rooted equally?'
'What is it we don't talk about: gender, ethnicity, religion?'
'Who has a voice?'
'Who has the knowledge?'

During the ensuing discussion, the team seemed to oscillate between these two themes, as if a focus on one was always threatening to leave out something of the other. Alternatively, other themes were raised that, however important, seemed to cloud or deflect the discussion, e.g., 'How do we share the work so as to take account of differences in contracted hours?' or 'Shouldn't we be emphasizing more the positives: our successes in engaging with very difficult families.' At times I felt I was little more than a scribe, noting down what was said to feed back later as an *aide memoire*.

I gradually found myself thinking that what the team might be experiencing, implicitly naming but then avoiding might be thought of as an *existential* dilemma and an *existential* anxiety. To negotiate, constructively share and discuss the differences between its members the team needs, as it implicitly acknowledges, to discover or evolve a shared 'boundary of identity.' But to evolve a shared 'boundary of identity' may require putting in question or suspending just those pre-existing boundaries of identity that mark out and serve to define the differences.

(One might compare this necessary act of suspension with the dismantling of prior expectations and assumptions around leadership that I pointed to as one of the psychic challenges facing the vice presidents in my first example.)

These pre-existing boundaries are not simply professional (as, say, in the case of any multi-disciplinary team). They are also organizational and institutional. All the members of the team continue to have an alternative organizational home, are subject to appraisal there, and may be in continuous contact with former colleagues, including in respect of client referrals, etc.

If the team is to take authority (lateral authority), as I think it must, for defining and shaping its own boundary, its own sense of sameness (for no one else has the experience out of which such a boundary can be both found and made), its members have to be prepared to risk finding themselves at odds with their own home base. Or rather, perhaps, to return to the quotation I cited earlier, to be 'able to contest, without this deteriorating into conflict or being evaded as a way of dealing with the fear of conflict'.

I suggest it is the anxiety attendant on this task that gets defensively expressed in the preoccupation with the kind of management arrangements the team had earlier spent time complaining of. As if behind the complaint there still persisted the wish for a more dependent leadership, both paternal in setting a direction and maternal in containing and modulating the pressures and tensions within: a release from the burden of the lateral.

In fact, the team moved a fair way in addressing this dilemma, rethinking its practice of supervision, evolving new ways of both sharing and discussing client work, instituting more reflective team meetings that could serve to contain and process their experience, and moving towards a more proactive stance in engaging both with agency management and with the wider network of referrers.

One can, I think, sometimes become over-preoccupied with the shadow side of lateral relations, as indeed of sibling relationships, which can also be both energizing and creative. (I find myself wondering whether this over-preoccupation may not be itself a last ditch defence of the vertical paradigms we seem to know and to need so much.) But whichever is the case, dark or light, I suspect we are increasingly going to have to take their measure.

BACK TO THE FUTURE; THE RELEVANCE OF A PAST TRADITION

In following this path I want to suggest we may find ourselves, and paradoxically, returning to and profiting from something of the founding preoccupations of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, fifty years ago, though in a very different context and from a new vantage point.

I think these preoccupations, arising out of the wartime experiences of the founding body of psychiatrists, psychologists, and their colleagues, centred around what might be termed the recovery of responsibility and authority across the surface of our social, organizational, and community engagements. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, it challenged the hierarchical paradigms of the pre-war consensus while at the same time offering a new dynamic account of their origins (cf. Garland, 2006).

Bion's early work with groups essentially focused on releasing the group's own capacity for recovering a sense of internal agency. As he put it in the concluding sentences of a paper on the leadership group project, written in 1946 and referring to experiences during the first Northfield Experiment:

It must be remembered that the study of intra group tensions is a group job. Therefore so long as the group survives, the psychiatrist must be prepared to take his own disappearance from the scene in not too tragic a sense. Once the rout is stopped (i.e. the tendency of doctor and patients to collude in 'running away from the complaint') quite timid people can perform prodiges of valour so that there should be plenty of people to take his place. (Bion, 1999, pp. 9–13)

which seems neatly to capture an idea of dispersed rather than distributed leadership.

At the more organizational level, Eric Trist's and Ken Bamforth's discovery of a tradition of self-regulating work teams in the coal industry led to the conceptualization of the autonomous work group, in which no one has a specialized leadership function, and opened up quite new considerations surrounding issues of organizational choice that both questioned and challenged prevailing orthodoxies (Trist et al, 1963).⁵

When I first joined The Tavistock Institute, in the early 1960s, something of this radical spirit still haunted the corridors. But already it was under some strain. By this time Elliott Jaques had left the Institute and was already on the way to challenging and eventually dismissing out of hand the emphasis on group dynamics, let alone group autonomy, in favour of a general theory of bureaucracy which both re-interpreted and reinstated a hierarchical model (Jaques, 1976; Kirsner, 2004). Within the field of group relations, the institutionalization of the group relations conference, with its focus on learning for leadership and its sharp differentiation between staff and members, accentuated, as indeed it was intended to, the regressive pull into implicitly 'hierarchical styles of functioning', to borrow Caroline Garland's useful phrase, without fully opening

out, in my view, its more 'egalitarian' or 'fraternal' counterpart (Garland, 2006).

I do not want to distance myself from these developments, which are part of my own professional inheritance and have clearly made significant contributions to our understanding of group and organizational life. But I do think that something may have been lost or lost sight of in the process.

There seems to be something inherently difficult in resisting the pull towards thinking of hierarchy as the only possible form of organization. One may recall that even Elliott Jaques, outlining his general theory of bureaucracy, acknowledged that there were some enterprises – for example, academic institutions and hospitals – that did not and should not altogether fit his organizational model. Yet, over the past decade, these institutions, either willingly or unwillingly, have themselves been subject to take-over by precisely such a model. Professional committees have become management committees; Chairs have become Directors, Principals or Vice Chancellors have become Chief Executives; task performance has increasingly become specified and regulated from above; supervision, in its management no less than its professional form, has become ubiquitous.

Within our own practice also, I think, the language of leadership and followership (and even in some respects our way of working with and externalizing the notion of containment) still carries a certain implicit hierarchical or vertical spin.

I believe we have still some way to go in understanding the dynamics that drive this hierarchical drift and its roots in unconscious societal and group processes.

What makes this pressing, in my view, is precisely that the organizational and contextual worlds we now inhabit are no longer containable within a more familiar vertical form, as I have tried to illustrate in my two partial examples. From this perspective I would view what is happening, more especially within the public sector, as a defence against, rather than a response to, the contextual challenges such organizations are facing.

But alongside the question of the dynamics in play, and indeed one factor that may contribute to those dynamics, there is also a conceptual challenge: to think more imaginatively with our clients in discovering and evolving new organizational forms. The dynamics are only and ever half of the story. I think we may need to be bolder now, as were our forebears, in addressing the other half. In this respect at least we have still a lot to learn or to re-learn from our fathers.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in June 2006 at the Bridge Foundation in Bristol as a Memorial Lecture for Bob Gosling and in tribute to his lifelong commitment to 'keeping on moving'. The present, expanded version was given as a keynote paper at the OPUS International Conference in November 2006.
2. Although the qualifying use of 'collaborating' is a little clumsy, it is needed here to distinguish the area I want to explore from the more general area of interpersonal or intergroup dynamics, where there may be no shared membrane or boundary in view.
3. The theme of 'sameness and difference' and its significance in sibling and, by extension, lateral relations is a central thread running through Juliet Mitchell's recent work on sibling dynamics (Mitchell, 2004). In drawing on this distinction here and later in the paper, I am conscious of the risk of oversimplifying a more subtle and complex argument, the implications of which have yet to be worked through.
4. Boxer defines this as 'how the (client) will incorporate the service into the context of his or her practice of living, this (forming) the context of use for the service' (Boxer, 2004, p. 44).
5. In preparing this paper, I came across a lost, or at least neglected, series of papers by David Herbst, one of the generation of colleagues joining the Tavistock Institute in the later 1950s, who helped further and extend this vein of thinking. Published in 1976 in a slim volume entitled *Alternatives to Hierarchies*, these papers are remarkably prescient in respect of both the challenges being posed to hierarchical models in the latter half of the century and the opening out of consideration of new, emergent organizational forms (Herbst, 1976).
6. My own view is that this tendency within group relations conferences is linked to the relative neglect of the reciprocal dynamics, both conscious and unconscious, of work group functioning as contrasted with basic assumption activity (cf. Armstrong, 2005).

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