Beyond the Family Psychic Template

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Introduction

In this paper we put forward the working hypothesis that the family as a psychic template applied to organisations has a) moved from an explanatory hypothesis to an almost exclusive principle in group relations thinking and b) as a consequence, excluded other possible explanatory hypotheses and the use of other psychic templates. Beyond this, we explore the idea that the group relations community of practice may identify with the application of the family psychic template to the extent of at times acting it out rather than using it as a tool for thinking. We stress that this is a working hypothesis and that it has emerged from a collaboration that goes broader than ours. Former members of the AISA Executive and conference members and staff have also contributed to the findings and ideas presented here.

We attempt to build our argument from experiences in group relations conferences in 2002 and 2008 and from within our community of practice in group relations and systems psychodynamics (socio-analysis) in Australia and consider the implications for group relations conference design. We hope this may also further our thinking about authority relations, leadership and traditional organisational structures.

Generational Identifications

In defining generations there are two major influences. The first is the family, the second is group history. Most basically, the generations are defined in terms of lineage from parent to child. The incest taboo and the development of the human family generally keep this clear so that generations are not confused. Of course, generational identification goes beyond the family to cohorts of people in history, although the overlap in terms of ages within a cohort can be broad. Definitive historical moments generally define a generation – a war or the introduction of culture-changing technologies: the atom bomb or the micro-chip, for example. People grow up in the shadow of such influential events (Hopper, 2003).

Much of what is said about inter-generational issues must also be considered in terms of age and life stage. Our focus will primarily be on the way that family dynamics and their analysis influence how people consciously and unconsciously identify with generational positions in

their workplace relations. The psychic phenomena and anxieties aroused in inter-generational dynamics in the workplace might be seen to have their origins in early family experiences. Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus the King, which Freud used as a poignant analogy for the psychic journey of the child, is essentially an inter-generational drama. It has an almost unquestioned currency within our community of practice vernacular.

Our enquiry begins with our learning from a group relations conference in 2008, exploring intergenerational dynamics in the workplace. This seemed to offer a framework for thinking anew about the events that gave rise to its theme. These events include the closure of the Australian Institute of Socio-Analysis (AISA) in 2004. AISA was the home of group relations in Australia from 1983-2004. While the material causes for the closure were multiple, there is a strong case to be made that inter-generational dynamics (if only as a frame of identification) had a lot to do with it.

We acknowledge that family as a 'psychic template' or framework for understanding intra-organisational dynamics has been explored elsewhere (Long, 2005; Morgan, 1997; Sievers, 1995). In this paper, we hypothesise about the impact of the predominance of 'family-as-psychic-template' applied to organisational settings. Further, we speculate about the power of the leadership/followership relation to (possibly inadvertently) invoke this identification with family, which, once invoked, acquires its own, seemingly intractable, momentum. In this particular instance, we explore AISA's Director/ member relation. We argue that there is a somewhat taken-for-granted transposition of family and related inter-generational dynamics into organisational contexts that can give rise to the very dynamics that they seek to explain. That is, there is a circular causal relationship between the group identification that is invited and invoked (often by leaders and consultants and offered as an interpretation of events) and the ensuing group dynamics and emotional experiences. It is hard, if not impossible, to know the *original cause* in this often escalating spiral: primitive dynamic or its invocation? We argue that perhaps the idea of cause and its interpretation is problematic.

We maintain that similar to, but qualitatively different from, Bion's Basic Assumption group processes (Bion, 1961), primitive anxieties, anchored in early experiences in the family, can resurface in organisational life in ways that can effect a swing in individuals and groups to paranoid-schizoid or other primitive emotional functioning. Like BaG processes, they seem unavoidable and can function in ways that also support Work Group and task-oriented functioning. In recent years there seems to have been a preoccupation with inter-generational

dynamics, in both our field and the organisations that we consult to, that may serve to preclude other frames of reference and group identifications that may better serve to engender creative and collaborative task-oriented group and organisational functioning.

Group and Intergroup Identifications (a theoretical framework)

The theoretical framework of intergroup dynamics (Alderfer 1987) inclusive of Devereux's articulation of 'group-level transference' reminds us of the power of group identifications to 'prime' our perceptual and emotional experiences:

> *To the extent that group memberships and relations among groups shape how others react to us and how we perceive those reactions, we are indeed captured by the groups to which we belong. We are, of course, most fully prisoner of those groups of whose membership we remain unaware. (Alderfer, 1987, p.202)*

This framework is useful for considering inter-generational dynamics because there is evidence to suggest that many of these dynamics are concerned with group identifications. As Alderfer claims, we all belong to multiple groups and an awareness of group membership becomes most obvious when interacting with other groups,

> *...which group will become focal at the moment will depend on who else representing which other groups is present and what identity group and organizational-group issues are critical in the current intergroup exchanges...How group members relate to each other within their group, and to the expectations placed on them by others, is highly dependent on the nature of both the intragroup and intergroup forces active at the time. (Ibid. p.205)*

Alderfer concludes,

> *Intergroup theory proposes that both organization groups...and identity groups... affect one's intergroup relations and thereby shape one's cognitive formations. (Ibid. p. 219)*

We can add to this last quote the words 'both consciously and unconsciously'.

Members of generational cohorts might be seen in terms of 'identity groups'. They provide points of identification, found for example in terms such as 'middle-aged', 'teenagers', 'young adults', 'the aged' or more recently, 'generation x', 'generation y' or 'baby boomers'. Such cohort/age identity groups may provide identity through reference to age/life related issues such as parenting, education, music or public and political events one grew up with.

Long (1984) argues that when joining a new group, members will identify with the group on the basis of its somehow 'belonging' to a pre-existing authority. 'The group-that-was-joined' is conceived by a founding authority, and members only gradually come to see it as a 'group-that-is-created' through their own exercise of authority. Age or generational-based identity groups may unconsciously be seen to belong to their members only after having won them from a previous generation.

Identity groups may exist for extended periods of time. For example, men and women; young and old; conservatives and liberals; blacks and whites. But new identity groups may form as part of social history, for instance, professional groups, 'the class of "89"', 'those in the 2009 bush fires in Victoria' or 'group relations communities of practice'. Each identity group has its authorities and often has distinguishable founders: the founders of group relations work, for example. From this perspective, those who form for work purposes on the basis of identity groups and who interact with those from other identity groups will have both internal and external dynamics to contend with.

Internally they must find ways to work within the parameters first devised by the founding authorities, perhaps changing, augmenting and developing them, in order for the identity to become internalised and open to development and transformation; this is lest the identity remain outside and still only belong to the founders or older generation. In tandem, the founding authorities must find ways to leave the parameters open to development and transformation that might be initiated by those who join or by the founders themselves. A failure of this openness on either side creates the circumstances in which the newcomer is at risk of either remaining a disenfranchised 'child' in the system or having to wrest the purpose and leadership of the group from the existing authorities. The existing authorities risk their own stagnation or redundancy. None of these are particularly attractive alternatives.

Externally the group members must also find ways to take on the chosen or given identity in such a way that it does not prevent working creatively with other groups.[1]

Learning from the 2008 group relations conference

The theme for the 2008 conference emerged from two places. First, within the community of practice here in Australia and internationally we seem to be dealing with inter-generational phenomena and, in particular, the issue of succession. We use the words 'seem to be' because, on closer examination, it seems this may be just one interpretation of the dynamics involved.

Looking more broadly, we can see these issues alive in various forms in the media and the organisations to which we consult. To hold a group relations conference on the theme of inter-generational dynamics was an opportunity to examine both the creative and destructive potential of these dynamics.

From the conference, we discovered a number of interesting things. For example, in the inter-group event we discovered that the so-called 'Generation X', who were the middle group in this conference (and mostly middle-aged women) when thinking and working within an inter-generational frame of reference, became silent, sapped of energy and somewhat paralysed. It was as if they were conforming to the stereotype of the 'silent generation'.

The so-called 'baby boomer' generation (those 55+) might have all been in their 80s (although most were in their 50s) for the preoccupation that younger members had, while in their company, with anxieties associated with aging and mortality. However, in this inter-group event, where people were grouped according to their generation, the older generation were predominantly energetic and playful in a way that was possibly enhanced by an awareness of 'deadlines' – the expression they used was being 'closer to the end of the twig'.

By contrast, the 'young, or generation Y' showed an initiative for systematic hard work. They were anxious to demonstrate their intelligence, perhaps as a cover-up for their internal rivalries. They also celebrated their youth and beauty. Interestingly, the young group were keen to interact with the oldest group and more or less ignored the 2 groups who were their

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[1] This seems to fit with Smith (1983) and his concept of dynamic conservatism. It also puts us in mind of Bion's container/contained and the container not being too much of an 'obstructive rigidity' (Bion, 1970) The point about working with other groups is very germaine to the GR context.

immediate seniors. The older group spoke of feeling protective and 'sort of like grandparents' to the young ones.

When mixed age groups worked in the small study group system, what emerged included a stifling 'political correctness' that may have doubled as a mask for more primitive defences and anxiety about death or anxiety about the appropriateness of really engaging creatively across the generational divide, as if it might have been incest. It's hard to describe how tense and polite people were, while at the same time there was an undermining and dismissiveness occurring at a subtle level. As an example, a dialogue began with an older woman talking about how uncomfortable and guilty she felt about how her generation had 'stuffed up' the planet and how anxious this made her for her grandchildren's future. As the discussion unfolded, it didn't seem possible to consider that the young people might be resourceful enough to find new solutions. Unlike the stereotype of generation Y being brash, demanding, loud and only out for themselves, the young people were deferential, meek and tried hard to put things in ways that would neither offend the older people nor draw attention to the possibility that a 50 year old might feel envious of their youth. At the same time, one young man (30) said on a number of occasions, 'I don't know why the older generation are so hung up about succession and why they can't just bow out gracefully.' What this communicated to older members of the group was that they were already redundant and he had nothing to learn from them. Interestingly, in his case, the older person in the organisation referenced was only 55. He was finding it difficult to assert his authority and demonstrate his expertise out of deference and for fear of offending her. It was put to him that if he focused on those work-related issues in which he had considerable and superior expertise rather than the interpersonal sensitivities, these supposed inter-generational dynamics would probably cease to be relevant.

In the frame of studying inter-generational dynamics, conference members seemed to identify with and 'act out' the stereotypes of the generation that they had been assigned to: 'grandparent approaching death and being delighted in and protective of the grandchildren', 'boring, silent middle-aged person' and 'young person who knows nothing, has no competency and acts to prematurely push the oldies off the twig'. Significantly, it was as if these relations belonged to a family constellation.

As a staff group, we wondered about the terror that was palpable. Terror appeared in the small study system, the large study system and in dreams in the staff group leading up to the

conference. At first, unconscious anxiety about death seemed a plausible hypothesis, but we speculated that this might only serve to mask the more terrifying anxieties associated with the incest taboo. As Freud (1917) maintained, the oedipal story invokes terror as we recognise the truth of it as our own unconscious story (in Strachey and Richards, 1981 p. 374). The lines between family relations and inter-generational relations became blurred. At an emotional level, we can hypothesise that the feelings present found their antecedents in early childhood relations in the family and as remnants of the Oedipus complex and its associated feelings of guilt.

As the week progressed, people reflected on the impact of these dominating stereotypes. They questioned how accurate and/or useful they were and witnessed how imprisoning they were. It was as if members then collectively broke free of the shackles of these stereotypes and what resulted was an explosion of creative exuberance across and linking the generations. A cross-generational singing group was formed, for example. As one member described it, 'once the prison walls we create for ourselves are challenged by real relationships and interaction, they become more fluid.' In the institutional event some groups moved outside the spaces designated by management. For a time, it was as if the staff as management group became completely redundant while groups explored something other than the seeming hierarchical structure provided. As a management group we asked ourselves if this was an act of rebellious flight from the work and an attack on our authority or a genuine attempt to explore a different way of being an organisation. Something seemed to be pushing against the boundaries of normal and familiar models of organization, albeit, still mostly within them.

This raised the question of what it is about the way we structure our organisations that may serve to reinforce the inter-generational stereotypes that keep individuals stuck and that work against inter-generational linking, bridging and collaboration. It showed how the group-that-was-joined, provided by the conference management to study inter-generational dynamics, was augmented by the group-that-was-created through the members taking up their authority for membership in new ways. This augmentation was not so much a rebellion as an extension of what the founding authorities had provided. Inter-generational relations were able to move away from the debilitating anxieties raised around the incest and murder of the oedipal story, so evident in the large study group experience, to a trust in being able to work creatively together. It was not that oedipal anxieties were totally dispelled. It was more that they had been explored and contained enough so that other dynamics could come into play. We could look at this as developmental movement beyond the oedipal complex. Something that helped

with this was the development of new cross-generational identity groups (groups-that-were-created) that could include mutual histories and shared experiences within the conference, much as broad generational cohorts share histories and experiences (Hopper, 2003).

Evidence from the AISA story

Our learning from the conference offers a perspective for the exploration of events leading to the closure of AISA and, more broadly, speaks to the potential destructiveness of working *from* an inter-generational and/or family group identification rather than *working through* such dynamics. The events have often been spoken of in our community of practice in terms of inter-generational dynamics. As already mentioned, they had some influence on the choice of theme for the 2008 conference. We can trace the origins of the ideas involved back to the international conference in 2002, held in Lorne, 'Exploring Being in Global Systems' where an idea emerged in our community of practice that may have gone to work in creating some of the cultural conditions for the closure of AISA.

This 2002 conference contained members from group relations organisations globally. During exploration of the dynamics a hypothesis was advanced that the 'younger generation' were enacting the oedipal drama and were seeking to 'kill off' the older generation. We link to this hypothesis an association of 'transference vampires', which strongly caught part of the mood during the social dreaming and pointed to the transferences occurring between the generations. The idea hovered around that the generations were enacting the oedipal scenario from both sides: the younger generation with murderous and ambitious intent and the older with murderous and infantalising intent (one must remember in Oedipus that Laius' intent was to kill his son in the first instance); unconscious, of course. This was all complicated by gender, interpersonal and country-of-origin dynamics.

Since then, the oedipal hypothesis has seemed pervasive in exchanges with many colleagues in the work. In conversations at subsequent annual meetings of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organisations (ISPSO), for example, dialogue for Brigid with peers was often dominated by thoughts about the role of the 'younger generation' in the field and the need to think about succession and leadership. In relations with the 'older generation', quite often there would be remarks about the risk to the quality of the work by younger members or the risk of prematurely being 'pushed out'. One might argue that

thoughts such as these are always and inevitably so, but we have cause to challenge the particulars in this case and question what purpose it serves and how it comes to pass.

Evidence from the AISA executive would suggest that its members' struggles with the challenges of addressing questions of leadership succession and organisational development were permeated with anxieties that might have been linked with the oedipal hypothesis.

> *Most of us are locked into a dependency-transferential position as a product of working with [the Director], who appears to foster a contradictory relationship with members: one of growth and learning through taking personal authority and simultaneously, one of dependency in looking to the father figure for direction. (Nixon et al., 2001)*

Many of the AISA executive members were either current or past students of the director; at the same time they were charged with the task of being his employer and responsible for the governance of the organisation. This director had held the role for 20 years and since the organisation's foundation (thus, truly a 'founding authority' in Long's 2005 terms). As one executive member commented, it seemed difficult to find a boundary between the director's role and the person and, indeed, between the organisation of AISA and the director. Some executive members reported feeling that any critical comments and questions about the organisation were received by the director as if they were a personal attack. The director may have experienced them this way and reportedly said so. While executive members believed they were executing their roles as managers of the organisation in critically examining AISA's structure and position, the blurred boundaries between the person of the director and the organisation meant that their experience of questioning policies or practices was difficult since it was always infused with the risk that this might be experienced as an attack and/or may indeed have been the enactment of an unconscious attack.

Members of a socio-analytically minded group, if challenged by such a hypothesis, are duty bound to examine it for its veracity. However, as one member commented, this turning of the focus in on themselves (set in train by an interpretation) 'takes the focus away from healthy positive enquiry from the external situation which might suggest that in reality issues are…more about probity, transparency, fairness and integrity.' The dynamics in the executive seemed at times to be driven from a paranoid/schizoid state of mind, and its members found it difficult to think.

At the time AISA was going through a period of growth, or at least there was a desire for growth. Through the Fellowship Program, for the first time, there was a critical mass of people training to be professional socio-analysts who had a vested interest in AISA's development. While AISA was known internationally within the field, members spoke often of how little known it was amongst prospective client organisations and in Australian society more broadly. They saw the potential for the organisation to play a more meaningful and influential role in society through the expansion of its activities. While over the years, many members had dedicated a lot of time (much of it voluntary) to the success of AISA programs and GR conferences, the director was the one constant who worked in and on AISA full-time. In Australia, we owe a debt of gratitude for the dedication and persistence of this director in ensuring the high quality of the programs and training offered by AISA. However, after 20 years, there was a strong push for change, and in particular, a change in leadership structures and tenure.

To this point, the director, from a variety of authorised roles, oversaw and made decisions about many things – from the selection of staff for conferences and training programs to the choice of consultants for any consulting work that came in. If the organisation was to grow and develop, it was no longer feasible, nor desirable, for it to continue to be managed by one individual. The director and the executive recognised the need to think about succession, but this proved dangerous territory,

> *The issue of succession, or of moving past [the Director's] leadership, seems exceedingly painful and is treated with dread, as if dealing with the issue would have catastrophic consequences. The often unconscious phantasies around this issue are very dominant in the membership and get in the way of creativity and generativity. (Ibid).*

In response to the push for change and a concern that the organisation had become overly dependent upon the role of director, in 2003, the director proposed a new design for the governance structure based on principles of distributed leadership. The role of director of AISA was to be replaced with a number of activity 'directors'. Members of the executive would take up these roles or portfolios. This design effectively did away with the role of director of AISA as a single point of accountability for the organisation. The new model was welcomed and embraced by members of the executive, and a rigorous process of appointing individuals to roles was commenced. However, it was reported that about 6 months into this

restructure process, the director had a change of heart and announced that he no longer supported the idea of AISA not having a director role as a single point of accountability, suggesting that it was untenable; the organisation would not survive, and he threatened to, and then subsequently did, resign from his role. At the same time, according to an outline of events that was distributed to the membership by an executive member, the director asserted that the executive were acting to 'topple the director'.

At least one executive member subsequently reflected that perhaps the organisation needed a primary director, but it seemed impossible to think about anyone in this role but its current incumbent. Thus it was not clear whether or not the executive (acting on behalf of the membership) were unconsciously holding onto this new design so as to avoid the issue of succession in the role of director – easier to do away with it. This member recalled that executive meetings seemed to be characterised by paranoid anxieties,

> *The stress in the room was enormous, I felt mad at times - the dynamics in the exec were so toxic.*

As it was related, the toxic dynamics were between other members of the executive and the director. Others in the group described feeling paralysed by the director's presence and his hostility. The director believed that his previously proposed model would not work, and he strongly opposed it. It seemed impossible to have a reasonable dialogue since the dynamics were felt to be pervaded by paranoid-schizoid processes. Consequently, the very thing that brought the group together (a shared passion for and commitment to socio-anlysis) was not able to be put to use in the service of the group.

In early 2004, the organisation was discovered to be at risk of trading while insolvent. A number of planned programs had been cancelled due to lack of applicants. The executive took the decision to cease trading and, in effect, to close the organisation. We recall two predominant reactions to this. On the one hand, it was as if there was a huge collective sigh of relief, and on the other, people were left feeling scarred and bereft by the experience. As one director reflected five years on, 'the damage and trauma to me personally was incalculable.' Others also spoke of how shocking and damaging the experience had been.

During this time, the hypothesis about an oedipal enactment (linking back to its introduction some years previously) was in members' minds and on their lips. Gouranga Chattopadhyay, a

Fellow of AISA, sent the executive a message putting forward the hypothesis again that an oedipal dynamic was being enacted and the 'children' were 'killing off the father'. Chattopadhyay subsequently wrote about it this way in *Dare to Think the Unthought Known:*

> *AISA professionals recognised the heavy dependence on [the Director], but did little about it. However, the baD was covertly setting a process of counter-dependency until early in this century a new Executive Council figuratively (also literally almost financially) "killed" the father figure…and thoroughly fucked the Mother AISA. This acting out of the unconscious Oedipal drama exhausted the children after [the Director] left… I have given the Oedipal hypothesis and circulated it to all members. (Chattopadhyay, 2006 p. 248)*

At the same time, an executive member, Allan Shafer, offered an alternative hypothesis about a reverse oedipal enactment in which the 'father', unwilling to allow the 'children' to grow up, 'kills the children off'. One might think of this as a Kronos myth, Kronos being the Athenian god who ate his own children to prevent being overthrown. As indicated earlier, attempted murder of the child is also prominent in the oedipal myth. These two sides of the primitive phantasy led to a 'group that could not be created'. Neither could the founding authority, nor the potential successors, achieve a new identity.

With hindsight, it seems possible that the director, the executive and AISA's members were in the thrall of a set of identifications that had little to do with the task of the organisation. As described, the emotional experience was filled with terror and paranoid-schizoid functioning. The result was the resignation of the director and the closure of AISA. It seems reasonable now to hypothesise that the introduction of the family psychic template of oedipal relations into the system in relation to organisational succession during the 2002 conference, and its acceptance by many leaders in the field, may have invited and/or reinforced a collective identification with the oedipal drama, giving it predominance and power – at both a conscious and an unconscious level – to function as a major operating assumption in the community of practice.

It may seem a blatant heresy to question a fundamental assumption of psychoanalysis and one that is strongly invoked in group relations work – that is, that oedipal relations and dilemmas are integral to all relations. However, we argue that the family/oedipal psychic template, while being one important source of dynamics, may not be the only one. It may be possible to

activate other forms of organisation. Indeed, Lawrence invites us to think of organisations from the perspective of the Sphinx rather than Oedipus (Lawrence, 1997).

The inter-generational group relations conference taught us that if you invite people to explore inter-generational dynamics in the here-and-now and to identify with a generational group, they are likely to initially conform to the stereotypes therein. This is done both in terms of how they behave and, most importantly, in terms of how they feel about themselves and, consequently, how they feel about relations with others. In the inter-generational conference, when this became explicit other identifications became possible, and indeed choices about these could be made. So when a group chose to identify itself as the singing group, for example, or the outdoors group, this identification became the basis for assumptions and group functioning. The dynamic was that people at first took up an *assigned* identification and later developed their own *chosen* identifications (see Long, 1984). They first joined a group and later made one.

As Freud observed, the drama of Oedipus the King has a power to move us at a deeply unconscious level. It could be said we all have a valency to identify with it and respond with strong emotions. If this identification is invited by a tradition and its leaders, what power might it have to make manifest the emotions and ensuing dynamics that it was intended to describe? Brigid has experience of being in its thrall in her relations with older members in the field – in little ways plagued by the thought that she might be engaged in "killing them off". It was not until she began to think about this paper and the power of group identifications to elicit a particular emotional response (or in Alderfer's terms, our cognitive formations) that she also began to question the validity of its place of prominence either in our community of practice or in organisations more generally.

It is a big question to pose. If the oedipal family psychic template is not ***the*** fundamental descriptor for all groups and organisations, what might be the alternatives?[2] Is the child always 'father to the man' in organisations, as in the vision of developmental psychology, or might sometimes the culture of the adult become fundamental to organisational life? Or at least might there be a place for Bion's view of the work group where maturity and a scientific valency are the fundamental principles?

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[2] A colleague, Himadri Potter has pointed out to us that Norman O. Brown in the mid 20th century also examined the possibilities that the oedipal hierarchical form of organisation might be a deviation from other forms. Also, although the 'modern' form of family post the incest taboo has been a central basis for our civilisations, the primal horde discussed by Freud may also provide a psychic template for some aspects of organisation – a pre-family form.

Implications for future GR conferences and their design.

We are arguing that group relations must include the capacity to identify a number of psychic templates within organisational life and that the family oedipal one is too often unconsciously adopted as *the* template when dealing with dynamics within its own community of practice. If a working hypothesis of oedipal enactment emerges, this in turn influences how people take up their roles, perhaps sometimes enacting the hypothesis as the fulfilment of a prophesy. Such working hypotheses, if presented as definitive interpretations from authorities, may counteract the emergence of other psychic templates such as the work group or the democratic assembly.

In this, we must draw the obvious distinction between running an institute or association that sponsors group relations work *and* running a group relations conference. Although learning from the latter may be applied to the former, they have different tasks and warrant different structures. We are not arguing the oedipal family psychic template is never relevant, just that its privileged position in thinking about our own communities of practice blinds us to other possibilities, invites collusion in the dynamic and curtails further creative development.

Form and function; structure and dynamics co-evolve and are intertwined. In another conference held at RMIT University in 2009, the institutional event was re-designed using the Grubb model of the World Event. Member groups were asked to elect leaders who then became members of a leadership forum with responsibility for running the event in collaboration with management. This provided a structure for distributed leadership and democratic decision making. The members learned a lot from this redesign, not least how to think about the move from imposed hierarchy to elected representation. The relatedness to the management group was one that was less obsessed with 'what management was thinking' and more about negotiation in the development and fulfilment of task. The transferential issues of parent/child became less important than the process of collaborative effort and the analysis of resistances against this. In this another aspect of the family template could be explored – that of sibling rivalry and its possible transformation (or not) into mutual work.

All this implies that the conference design of the future requires a form that might encourage more distributed leadership or other less hierarchical structures. It implies that rather than primarily straining after an hypothesis that describes the unconscious nature of the total institution, a structure emerges to look at the implications of different hypotheses arising in different parts of the institution. This may involve a design for more fully studying change as

it occurs in the conference. It may involve a task of more than studying, but also one of developing working communities (Long 2008). We are sure that all this is done to some extent within the group relations methodology, but we wish to make this more explicit.

Conclusion

An observation we make is that family is such a dominant model for relations between people in organisations – what we think of as a 'psychic template' – that it leads to unconscious impotence. What psychoanalysis discovered as an explanatory concept has, at times, become an unconscious directive in our community of practice and in group relations fundamentalism. We repeatedly learn from clients that organisations are too often regarded as places where the children never grow up and the parents/teachers hold all the power, control, authority and decision-making. This cripples the capacity to be creative, to take up authority for work, to have robust debates and to be thoughtful agents in adapting to complex and changing external and internal circumstances.

Age-related stereotypes are another such 'psychic template' or, in Morgan's terms, 'psychic prison' that serves to keep people stuck – perhaps because they invite a preoccupation with mortality and an ensuing political correctness that is both stifling and false. False because it is anchored in untested and unchallenged stereotypes. Members of the 2008 conference discovered that if they could abandon these stereotypes and instead build their group identity and relations by reference to a shared task, the energy levels rose and a joyousness and appreciation for each other and each other's differences emerged (regardless of whether this was to do with age, gender, race, culture or work experience).

We reflect that trying to imagine moving beyond the fact (or metaphor) of the Oedipal drama and the 'family-as-psychic template' may be a futile enterprise. What might there be to take its place? Yet, the work of group relations and systems psychodynamics more broadly is fundamentally about creating a learning environment in which the transformation in the individual's and the group's capacities to take up authority, to think, to reflect, to be an active agent in the making and taking up of roles within organisations is possible. We appeal to and engage with adults in this enterprise and we respect adulthood. The oedipus complex describes and belongs to a developmental process in childhood, adolescence and regressive states. If it is not possible to move beyond family, in organisations, we wonder if it is not more useful to think of the relations between adult members of families

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