In which the Tavistock Paradigm is considered as a discursive practice

The danger [of this enterprise], in short, is that instead of providing a basis for what already exists..., one is forced to advance beyond familiar territory, far from the certainties to which one is accustomed, towards an as yet uncharted land and unforeseeable conclusion...   Is there not a danger that everything that has so far protected the historian [consultant, manager, psychologist...] in his daily journey and accompanied him until nightfall... may disappear, leaving for analysis a blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise? (Foucault 1972, p39)

INTRODUCTION

1. This paper was first written as a vehicle by which members of the Working Group on Groups and Organisations (GOWG) could get to grips with some of Foucault's concepts, and with Philip Boxer's reading of Foucault in one of his papers about organisation (Boxer 1994).   It also has a personal focus, in enabling me to examine critically the presuppositions which shape my own professional work and, I believe, limit its penetration into the kind of situations I am asked to address.   I am aware that some readers may not know much about the Tavistock's work.   I shall probably not succeed in taking full account of that.   For a brief history of the Tavistock Clinic and Institute, I recommend James Mosse's summary (Obholzer & Roberts 1994, pp1-8).

2. I am starting from the thesis that the Tavistock paradigm is articulated in concepts and practices which address a range of situations, but fail to engage with others because they articulate a 'reality' in which significant 'objects' do not exist and critical distinctions are not problematised.

3. As I have worked on this paper I have become more aware of a Rice/Miller/ 'Leicester' conference/group relations/OPUS sub-group within the whole Tavistock tradition.   For many people this sub-group <u>is</u> the Tavistock.   Three points about it strike me

    (i)   This sub-group now works predominantly in the public and voluntary sectors with a strong focus on mental health institutions. This has provided an enclave within which the post-war paradigm has continued to work, or at least to remain viable.   With the development of internal markets, compulsory competitive tendering and the rest, it appears to me to be decreasingly well equipped to meet the challenges with which it is presented, although there are signs that it may respond to the challenge.

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(ii) It gives more prominence to a psycho-analytic analysis of social and organisational situations, than - as far as I can tell - do, say, Lisl Klein (1991), Harold Bridger (1990a), Elliott Stern (1996), or the Grubb Institute group (Reed 1999).

(iii) It makes more use of the open systems model, as first set out by Rice, than do others within the tradition - as does the Grubb Institute.   There is however a significant point of divergence here, since both Bridger and the IGA tradition (Foulkes, Skinner) use the term 'open systems' differently (*Cf* Bridger's (1990b) comment: "Bion, in my view, was not at ease with the group as an open system.   He was not at ease with the implications of ecological change in groups, institutions and communities.").   It may be true to say that, within the group relations tradition, systems are not open to the kind of impingement which challenges the system's self-definition.

4. The wider Tavistock tradition has been mapped by Eric Trist (1990, 1993). It has engaged more richly with industry and business (Miller and Rose (1988) describe the post-war Tavistock Institute as engaging primarily with industry), and has through Emery and Trist sought to conceptualise the social ecology in which individual organisations are embedded.

5. I have found it useful to regard the Tavistock tradition as a paradigm, in Kuhn's sense. A paradigm is characterised by a body of 'recognised achievements' which 'provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners' (Kuhn 1970).   So within a paradigm there are normative examples of research which determine what is theorised and how the discipline is practised. (But bear in mind that Kuhn's work is concerned with the natural sciences, in which norms of practice are more easily established because it is easier to see what works, cf Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982). It seems to me that there are a number of definitive ventures which have paradigmatic status in this domain - the Northfield Hospital experiments (Bridger 1990b), Trist and Bamforth's (1991) coal-mining study, the Glacier Metal project (Jaques 1951), Rice and Miller's Ahmedabad intervention (Rice 1958), Bion's study of group dynamics, and the 'Leicester' and Harold Bridger working conferences. In Foucault's terms this gives prominence to certain non-discursive practices, which insofar as they are not reflexive restrict the strategy ceiling of subsequent initiatives. (This concept of 'strategy ceiling' is developed in Boxer, P.J. and Palmer, B. (1997), p 18, which we presented at the ISPSO 1997 Symposium in Philadelphia: "The strategy ceiling of an agency is that level below which it is able to make *explicit* what its strategy is, and below which it is therefore able to commit its management to that strategy. But all levels are not always made explicit: senior management may keep to itself, or may take as given, implicit definitions at levels above the strategy ceiling. We could say that, above the ceiling, assumptions about the agency are kept 'in the family' (or even 'in the Family', for those who have read or seen 'The Godfather'! (Puzo, 1991).").

FOUCAULT'S THEORY

6.   How it is possible to characterise a discursive practice (such as the Tavistock discursive practice), in such a way that one can see more clearly what can and cannot be uttered within it, how it reflects themes that were dominant when it took its definitive form, and how it relates to other contemporary discursive practices. Foucault's concept of discursive formation provides an analytical tool, as elaborated by him in The Archaeology of Knowledge (1972), and as developed by Boxer (1994) in his Foucault paper. Foucault's theory of discursive practice 'decentres the sovereign subject and places the emphasis upon analysis of the rules of formation through which groups of statements achieve a unity as a science, a theory, or a text' (Smart 1985, p38).   Foucault says he introduces the term 'discursive formation' to avoid overloaded terms like 'science', 'ideology' or 'theory'. So these terms can be taken as neighboring terms to 'discursive formation'.

7.   The term 'discourse' focuses upon <u>acts</u> of speaking and listening, and that of 'discursive formation' on the entity so created.   A 'non-discursive practice' is roughly equivalent to an institution or institutionalised practice. (Jaques-Alain Miller (1992) points out that a non-discursive formation has a signifying function, so that the distinction collapses. The difference is I think between theory-in-use and espoused theory (Argyris and Schon 1974). See Foucault, M. (1980), p 197).   'Discourse' is a less precise term, referring to a cluster of statements which are perceived and named as a unity: the discourse of law, say, or stress, or equal opportunities.   It cannot be known in advance whether analysis of any such named domain will demonstrate that it constitutes a single discursive formation.   A discursive formation is made up of statements.   A 'statement' is any utterance which is meaningful on a particular occasion.   It is not just a contextless assertion, or a grammatical sentence as such. As Boxer (1994) suggests, a statement is what Austin (1962) called a 'speech act': it has illocutionary force (as a command, promise, plea, etc, between one subject and another), as well as locutionary force (by virtue of its content).

8.   Where are we?   We have the concept of a discursive formation, functioning as a linguistic environment for speakers and listeners which - in contexts where it is salient - sets limits to what they can utter, hear and understand in their conversation (including the internal conversation of their own thoughts).   (We have commented on occasions in our own experience of organisations, when we or others have said things which have passed by as though they had not be uttered.   These *may* be occasions on which what was said was just a noise, as far as the dominant discursive formation was concerned.).   Foucault proposes that a discursive formation can be described in terms of the relations between four constitutive elements:

(i)   The objects which constitute the givens - the furniture - of the universe created by the formation (eg 'madness' as the object of psychopathology).

(ii)   The status and location of the authoritative speaker within the discursive formation, and his/her position vis-à-vis the listener - what Foucault calls the enunciative modality (*eg* within the Tavistock paradigm, it is necessary to have

had experience as a group relations conference participant and staff member, in order make authoritative interpretations.)   Here we are into the question of the <u>subject</u> of the discursive practice, that is, the subject of the enunciation. This subject makes his/her presence felt within the text through the style and tone of voice he/she adopts.

(iii) The concepts which characterise the relations between the objects identified by the discursive practice (eg in zoology, the concepts of 'mammal', 'vertebrate', 'virus', etc).   I find in practice that I cannot readily distinguish between objects and concepts.

(iv) Foucault seems to have several ways of formulating what Boxer (1994) characterised as the WHY of a discursive practice.   It may be a unifying *theme* (like that of the kinship of all Indo-European languages in nineteenth century philology).   It may be an underlying *<u>strategic intention</u>* (and thus a manifestation of desire). In *The History of Sexuality, Vol 1*, Foucault (1981, p8) says that what he is interested in are 'not only these discourses but also the will that sustains them and the strategic intention that supports them.'   So we are not interested in themes as such, but in the interests they serve (eg why <u>did</u> nineteenth century philologists become wedded to the idea of the kinship of Indo-European languages?) Foucault (1981, p11) also refers to 'the <u>regime of power-knowledge-pleasure</u> that sustains the discursive practice... in our part of the world.'   In more Lacanian terms, we are talking about the position from which the subject speaks and so constitutes itself as a subject (Lacan 1977).

9.   Foucault finds that discursive practices do not turn out to have the kind of unity or unifying thrust that he had expected each of these four elements to provide: they are more heterogeneous, ambiguous, and fragmented.   Boxer (1994) relates the four elements to the speaking-and-listening schema: I think he cuts a few corners here, but must leave re-examination of this to someone else.

10. As a first take, I find myself thinking that the Tavistock discursive formation sustains a pretty rigorous analysis at the level of objects and concepts, but becomes murky when any question is raised about the *subjects* of interventions and their authority ('enunciative modalities'), or about the fundamental *positions* from which subjects speak and, in so doing, constitute themselves as subjects ('strategies').   Having said that, I have some qualifiers:

(i) My impression is that individual practitioners have in the past been more open to questioning of the authority of their assertions, and the position from which they emanate, than they are now. (Something has happened over the years.   In the early Leicester conferences I attended, directed by Rice, his introductory statement used to define the ethos of the conference as that of questioning all assumptions 'including our own'.   I took his stated assumptions at the beginning of his early books as having a similar force - as an invitation to question the theoretical underpinning of the intervention.   But as subsequent writers have repeated and elaborated this list of assumptions, it appears that the

reverse has happened. People have become so inculcated with these concepts - less frequently referred to as 'assumptions' - that they have become unquestionable.).

(ii) The limitations of the Tavistock paradigm are not solely the result of the limits of its 'horizon of meaning' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, p51), but also of the lack of diversity of objects within this horizon and of the concepts for describing their relations. So for example recent expositions of the theoretical framework have nothing to say about the organisation of the *environments* of organisations; yet this is vital for commercial organisations and is becoming increasingly so for statutory and voluntary organisations too.

11. Rather than attempt to be comprehensive, I shall in what follows focus upon *objects* and *strategies.*

Objects

12. The **group** is a focal object in this paradigm, as the name 'group relations' indicates. The definitive move in Bion's study of small groups was his shift from an individual to a group perspective.   The **individual** and the **organisation** are similarly essential furniture in the 'reality' constructed through this discursive practice, and tend to be viewed from the vantage point of the group; so that it can be said that 'the individual's sense identity is built up from internalised ideas of the groups to which he feels he belongs' (Reed and Palmer 1972, p5:2), and that an organisation is a 'group of groups'. (*eg* Stapely (1996): 'I use the term 'group' and 'organisation' as interchangeable on the basis that organisations consist of 'groups of groups').

13. However, the reification of the individual, the group and the organisation is not in itself distinctive to this paradigm: it is adopted uncritically from a wider movement of thought.   Nor are Tavistock practitioners specialists in everything to do with groups.   What is distinctive is I think the privileging of the **group as a point of intervention,** in learning and consultancy, through setting up meetings of groups in which interpretations of defensive systems are offered and worked through.   The group with its Tavistock consultant is thus loosely analogous to the analyst-analysand pair.   In Foucault's terms the group is not simply an object within a discursive formation: it is a key non-discursive formation within the whole apparatus of Tavistock theory and practice (An apparatus is: "...a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid... The apparatus is the system of relations that can be established between these elements." Foucault, M. 1980, p194).   Since it is the frequent *site* of speaking and listening, it is also an element in the *enunciative modality* of the discursive practice.   This privileging of the group has important consequences for the kind of knowledge which is generated.   For example, the bias towards seeing, and

intervening in, an organisation as a group of groups, leads to a systematic ignorance of many dimensions of the *complexity* of organisations.

14. I think the object that most clearly defines what the group relations approach is about - which serves as what Bion called the vertex of group relations - is fantasy (First suggested to me by Philip Boxer.   I am not making a psychoanalytic distinction between 'fantasy' and 'phantasy'. 'Fantasy' here may be more usefully regarded as a concept.).   The term **'unconscious processes'** has a similar function in the discursive practice. Study groups and group relations conferences are the primary settings in which people learn to deploy the group relations vocabulary to identify fantasy systems and unconscious processes.   Brian Farrell, an Oxford philosopher and a friend of Pierre Turquet, analysed a collection of accounts of work with groups, by me and other writers including John Adair and Harold Bridger, in these terms:

> Let us look again at what Adair *et al* are doing.   As we have seen, they each organise their groups somewhat differently in order to realise their various aims.   Naturally, therefore, these groups produce different sorts of material - which has to be put in order.   Now each operator proceeds to do this - to put his material in order - by picking out a pattern of features that he judges his material exhibits.   He embodies the upshot of this ordering in a set of concepts and generalisations. These jointly constitute what can be called his Way of Talking, or WOT for short; and he uses it to train the new group member, Smith, to spot the features that his WOT picks out... When Smith has acquired these skills, it is natural for the operator to talk about Smith by saying that he has now acquired some insight and understanding (Babington Smith and Farrell 1979, p107).

15. Farrell has spotted that this kind of work with groups initiates participants into a discursive practice (WOT).   He is right in implying that the practitioners do not perceive this, and fail to examine the kind of claim to truth that they are making.   He falls short in failing to recognise that his critique is itself generated within a discursive formation, which he does not problematise.

16. It is possible to list the unconscious processes and fantasy systems which are distinguished (*eg* mechanisms of defence like projection and splitting, and Bion's basic assumptions), though in attempting to do this I have difficulty in distinguishing between objects (the entities distinguished) and concepts (the way their relations are interpreted).   It may be more useful to draw attention to two ways in which the way these objects are delineated shapes the world which is constructed from them:

 (i) The way fantasy is distinguished from reality in a binary opposition excludes the possibility of questioning the reality of this 'reality'.   From a Lacanian perspective this seems to me to confuse the Imaginary with the Real, and to exclude the Symbolic register.

(ii) The term 'unconscious *processes'* implies a structure in which these processes take place, a structure which is itself unaddressed. If we hypothesise that the processes in any group or organisation are symptomatic of the structures within which they are taking place (cf Boxer's 1992, p7), then a discursive practice which distinguishes processes, rather than processes-within-structures, will tend to exclude the influence of structure from consideration. This can be seen in Bion's *Experiences in Groups,* in which disruptive processes in the group are attributed to a sump of disowned fantasies within the group, without reference to the influence of the context in which they are meeting.

17. At this point we encounter a question, which goes beyond describing the objects and concepts of the Tavistock paradigm. This is, what function does this WOT serve? This takes us into the domain of the themes and strategies of the discursive practice.

Strategies

18. Several suggestions about the strategic intention of the Tavistock practices are already on the table. I shall talk about those of Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (1988), and then about Boxer's (This paper (Boxer 1999) is a commentary on Obholzer, A. and Zagier Roberts, V. 1994), with some reflections of my own. Miller and Rose see the work of the Tavistock Clinic between the wars, and that of the Tavistock Institute after WW2, as a significant part of a larger thrust towards bringing subjectivity and social life within the domain of language and hence making 'human resources' susceptible to greater control. The distinctive focus of the Tavistock Institute was upon organisations and in particular upon industry and the wealth-generating sector (hence the Glacier Metal project and the Trist and Bamforth study of longwall coal-mining are paradigmatic studies in this field). So we see the pressures on capitalist economies to get more out of their workers and managers being translated into demands for ways of minimising management-union conflict and bringing about more effective selection and training, reduced absenteeism, higher morale, and greater commitment to productivity - demands which the Tavistock Institute helps to articulate and address.

19. This formulation of the strategic intention of the practices of the early Tavistock Institute throws light upon what I take to be a dominant theme in this discursive practice: that of unconscious processes as disruptive of task-directed behaviour, as constituting an 'anti-task' ("This *anti-task* is typical of groups under the sway of basic assumptions... The primary task relates to survival in relation to the demands of the external environment, while basic assumption activity is driven by the demands of the internal environment and anxieties about psychological survival", Obholzer, A. and Zagier Roberts, V. (1994, p 31). Although Rice did in fact assert that unconscious processes are also mobilised in support of the task of an organisation ("The more a group manages to maintain a sophisticated level of behaviour, the more it does so by using the emotions associated with one basic assumption to control those associated with the other two", Rice, A. K. 1958), and although other writers have questioned the negative evaluation of the primary process implied by

the Tavistock formulation (e.g. Medora Perlman's feminist critique in Stein, M. and Hollwitz, J. (1992, p175): "Bion and others...have made a significant contribution to our understanding of group unconscious life, but their vision, as was Jung's, is limited by biases about group life which originate in a view of the world which may be described as patriarchal. To reframe Bion's creative insight... allows us to see not just the pathology but the positive potential of the phenomena he describes."), the theme of disruptive unconscious processes is still alive and well, as the quote from *The Unconscious at Work* shows.

20. I would argue that this dominant theme is, in this country, linked to the negligible articulation of the discursive practice in relation to the <u>environment</u> of organisations and parts of organisations, and in relation to the problematisation of the <u>task</u> itself. Similarly, in Bion's work on groups, the concept of the work group is only sketchily developed. Once again, these statements do not do justice to the richness of the total Tavistock archive: Emery and Trist (1965, p21ff) published an analysis of organisational environments, which led Trist into a lifelong examination of the nature of what he called turbulent fields. But this work has barely penetrated writing from within the 'group relations' branch of the Tavistock tree.

21. Philip Boxer (1999, p153ff) draws attention to the absence from the Tavistock (group relations) discursive practice of Jaques's work on requisite organisation, and the way he 'brings together definitions of organisation based on aim and on primary task', and also to the absence of Foulkes's problematising of the relation between the individual and the group. He suggests that the Clinic (I'd like to add 'and the Institute') have

> no wish to open up a "point of diffraction" between the "old" consensus of hierarchical forms of organisation born out of the post-war institutional reforms of which it was an essential part, and other forms of organisation - other architectures - capable of sustaining performativity in relation to human service organisations.'

22. And why would that be? One answer would be that people like me have been able to go on making a living within a discursive practice based on the old consensus, by restricting our work to the public and voluntary sectors, in which it is still just possible to get by without problematising 'task', 'environment' and the 'organisation of demand'. My own laborious attempt to dis-identify from this practice may be symptomatic of the fact that various processes - scarcity, internal markets, the IT revolution and so on - are making it decreasingly possible to meet the challenge of cases presented to consultants in the public and voluntary sectors, from a Tavistock position.

23. This leaves unanswered the question why the Tavistock discursive practice became uncoupled from the original strategic intention of benefiting the economy by bringing the subjectivity and relationships of people at work under greater scrutiny and control. The answer may be that it didn't. What happened was more like a schism, in which practitioners like Elliott Jaques, Harold Bridger, Lisl Klein and

Bruce Reed, under various flags, continued to consult in the private sector, while the group relations community, with the 'Leicester' conference as a paradigmatic non-discursive practice, become more and more richly coupled into the not-for-profit sector.

24. Boxer also suggests (1999, p155) that the Tavistock (group relations) discursive practice is based on a Kleinian concept of fantasy which is incompatible with, for example, the attempt to problematise the whole Tavistock discursive practice, in which we are engaged in this paper.   The Kleinian concept does not accommodate the radical crossing of the fantasy which this attempt implies: it cannot be questioned without opening up the whole Freud-Klein controversy of the 1940s and perhaps - heaven forbid - entering into dialogue with the Lacanians.   This, he suggests, would threaten too many vested interests.

25. One such interest may be that group relations people have been able to protect the <u>pleasure</u> they get from the practices of group relations, by becoming increasingly coupled into the human services, and in particular the mental health, sector.   They have been able to continue to be viable within a psycho-analytic (Kleinian) language medium; whereas I think it is true to say that Jaques *et al* (para 23) are all working within an array of social science and other discursive practices, within which psycho-analysis has only a partly covert supporting role (or, in Jaques's case, has been repudiated altogether).

AFTERWORD

26. Of any discursive practice, Foucault asks: what <u>is</u> this whole way of speaking - this whole way of constructing this bit of reality - and what is it doing to us and for us? His question reminds me of the title of W S Graham's poem, "What is the language using us for?" (Graham 1979, p192).   What then are the kinds of judgment we make when we identify the elements of a discursive formation?   In particular, what kind of claim to truth can I make about the various assertions I have endorsed or made for myself about the strategic intention of the Tavistock paradigm?   It could be argued that this kind of writing is no different from interpretative writing in any context: the interpretations are themselves necessarily made within a discursive practice, the theme of which may be Marxist or humanist or feminist or anything else.   But such an argument overlooks the fact that Foucault's question is of a different order from questions about meaning which are made within an unproblematised discursive practice, and as such potentially generates a different order of answers, and opens up different possibilities for action.

> *What is the language using us for?*
> *It uses us all and in its dark*
> *Of dark actions selections differ.*
>
> *I am not making a fool of myself*

For you.   What I am making is
A place for language in my life

Which I want to be a real place
Seeing I have to put up with it
Anyhow.   What are Communication's

Mistakes in the magic medium doing
To us?   It matters only in
So far as we want to be telling

Each other alive about each other
Alive...

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