

Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications Online

JOURNAL ARTICLE

Original citation: Cooper, Andrew (2021) *The Tavistock – Now and then*. *New Associations* (33). pp. 9-10. ISSN 2042-9096

© Andrew Cooper / New Associations

This version available at: <http://repository.tavistockandportman.ac.uk/>

The Trust has developed the Repository so that users may access the clinical, academic and research work of the Trust.

Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or the publisher. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in Tavistock and Portman Staff Publications Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

This article is made available by kind permission of the British Psychoanalytic Council. Further information about New Associations can be found here: <https://www.bpc.org.uk/about-us/new-associations/>

Tavistock and Portman Centenary

The Tavistock - Now and Then

Andrew Cooper

No organisation stands still, and in an era of rapid, intersecting cultural, technological, political and policy change cannot afford to do so. The Tavistock is no exception. At the same time there is something remarkable about the tenacity with which the practices and values informing the core clinical, training and research ethos of the Tavistock have endured a century of change, and challenge.

'the practices and values informing the core clinical, training and research ethos ... have endured a century of change, and challenge'

Today I suspect the upper tiers of the organisation's hierarchy, and the external pressures and forces with which they contend, are vastly different to what they were even 15 years ago when I was myself a member of the board and a strategic leader. The 'modernisation' of our management style, the process of realistic adaptation to complex NHS and higher education training markets, the commodification of higher education, and the skill sets required to respond to these trends, have not always been welcomed by everyone. In my view they have been essential for survival, and to the protection of the crown jewels of our clinical and training enterprises. The organisational strongroom that guards and transmits these practices down the generations is peopled by clinicians, training teams and professional disciplines who somehow unite in being passionately devoted to a distinctive model of how mental pain and family, individual and societal suffering arises and can best be responded to. What is this 'model'?

Ever Thursday morning I join a group of colleagues and trainees for our weekly psychoanalytic family therapy clinical workshop, to reflect on our work with troubled adolescents and young people and their troubled families. Often these families have endured decades of internal conflict, anxiety, mental pain, trauma, with sources that reach back through the generations. Often we seem to be a service of last resort for them. We offer a four-session 'assessment', a chance to start work and for the family to gain a sense of what we can offer. Subsequently families may be seen regularly for two years or more, or for a shorter intervention. Family members may be referred on for individual therapy, parent work or couple therapy in other Tavistock services. The embeddedness of each service within a network of provision is a vital resource.

In the weekly workshop therapists typically present a recent session, and then we 'think together', drawing on our associations, emotional experience of the

material, observations of transference and countertransference dynamics; the therapeutic pair may explore how they are being subtly mobilised in ways that give insight into family dynamics. The clinical team is multi-disciplinary, always ethnically diverse, and alert to how socio-economic, cultural, racial and material forces intersect with unconscious processes in the life of the family. Clinical trainees do a lot of the direct work, rotating through the service as their placement requirements dictate, while established staff provide continuity, and act as culture carriers.

The workshop functions as a containing space, where the emotional complexity of the work can be freely explored; we aspire to accord everyone equal status in terms of the value of their contributions, regardless of experience, status, professional discipline. In this way the unconscious field or 'psychodynamic system' of the family extends to include the clinicians, the wider team, and the organisational management

function. At the centre of this field is our focus on 'the task', the work process, our relationships with one another and with the patients.

'Often these families have endured decades of internal conflict, anxiety, mental pain, trauma, with sources that reach back through the generations'

Varieties of this model carry over into the Tavistock's huge range of training programmes, only a small proportion of which are full 'clinical trainings'. Experience and relationship, attention to the emotional experience of these, making collective sense of the unconscious and systemic patterns at work in patients and how these are mirrored, paralleled, enacted – a variety of methods of learning about such processes sit at the core of our training programmes. Theory is vitally important of course, but we always endeavour not to let it frame our thinking prematurely.

'the unconscious field or 'psychodynamic system' of the family extends to include the clinicians, the wider team, and the organisational management function'

Today there are many modalities of treatment and training available within the Tavistock repertoire: brief therapies, CBT, non-violent resistance training, to name a few. But the ideal type of Tavistock work rests I believe on the notion of 'thinking together' and learning from experience, with Bion's invaluable ideas always in the background. These methods and principles have been extended and adapted to encompass attention to the socio-political environment so that Thinking Spaces (Lowe, 2015) dedicated to the open and contained exploration of the difficult dynamics of race, difference and diversity and Policy Seminars addressing current themes are both recognisably derived

from the core 'Tavistock technology' I've outlined above.

Through the turmoil and disruption of the Pandemic, our small but brilliant teams of technicians and communications specialists have enabled clinical, training and applied work to pivot rapidly and effectively online. We continue to see families and patients weekly on Zoom, provide training, supervise research and reach across the boundaries of the Trust. Recent public seminars on 'Whiteness – a problem for our times' with presentations by Helen Morgan, editor of *New Associations*, attracted audiences of around 700, and sessions on Tavistock thinking about trauma and other topics even larger numbers.

'... our small but brilliant teams of technicians and communications specialists have enabled clinical, training and applied work to pivot rapidly and effectively online'

I believe today's Tavistock is more diverse, less institutionally closed, more accessible than it was. But there are threats, and the financial environment as well as the NHS's oscillating stance on merger and (de)centralisation are constant preoccupations. There is a saying that in organisational life 'culture will always trump strategy'. In truth the story of the Tavistock's last 100 years has been about a constant and sometimes fraught interplay between the two. Our 'culture' seems largely intact and without it there would not be much left worth defending; but it has survived because good strategy and leadership has enabled it to. So, here's to the future...

Andrew Cooper is Professor of Social Work at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and the University of East London. He is a member of the BPF and also practises as a psychoanalytic family therapist at the Tavistock.

The Tavistock and Portman

100

YEARS

1920 to 2020