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### BOOK CHAPTER

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Intimacy and detachment: working relationships in a temporary institution

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#### *Background*

At Belgirate III there was an opportunity to form small groups, and we both joined one of the self-selected groups called "creativity". The group started well, and we felt comfortable being together, maybe because there was a match of expectations and skills in the group, which confirmed the choice we made in moving from the large group.

We played with ideas and acts of creativity which proved to be a satisfying experience. At the end of the conference, as we were saying goodbye and thinking about detaching from the intimacy of the conference, we were musing on the power of GR events. These are places where strangers join together, share experiences, often become quite close, and then say goodbye. Often the closeness is not continued, or it is renewed at another conference. It felt strange to be in such intensity of relationships and then let the contact evaporate. As we thought about this phenomena, so many other associations came to mind about our work in organizations, and we coined a phrase—"working intimacy".

The invitation to contribute to a book enlivened the idea and we have developed a virtual working intimacy in the hope that this idea will have some currency in other settings. Consequently we wrote this

chapter as a direct experience of working together at Belgirate. It was a joint project, written from two different countries, using the internet, Skype, and emails. It was a great challenge to maintain the intimacy and create an elegant chapter; we hope for generosity and creativity in reading this collation of our two different experiences, cultures, and language.

### *Introduction*

In the design of GR events there are moments of choice: Which group to join? Which role to take? Where to invest time, energy and relatedness? The stakes, in the moment, feel fraught with implications of power and personal authority. This becomes especially significant in a peer group or a network of potential colleagues. Why a group forms and how it develops, how it is lead, what roles people take, have been discussed in numerous publications. Here we look at how the intimacy appears and why some of the relationships in GR events become so potent.

We took our own experience at Belgirate III as a source of inspiration and analysis. There's no doubt that in relation to any other GR Conference, a meeting of peer practitioners has more facets. In Belgirate, many people have earlier personal or institutional relationships, so the question of "intimacy" is camouflaged among multiple implications. There is an additional complexity when we thought about the apparent knowing one another. (We say "apparent" as there are no criteria for the depth of knowing, from superficial acquaintance to deep and long relatedness, and intimacy.)

The form that "working intimacy" has taken for the authors of this chapter has also been the subject of exploration during this writing process. In order to maintain our connection we used Google to establish a conversation about our experience, which we include here as an example:

Angela: Tell me David, what made you choose the creativity group?

David: My feeling is that the group choose me. I felt the creativity when you took the leadership in this proposal, both in what you said and how you expressed it ... I am always very interested in exploring new ways to enrich the GR approach to organisations, other complementarities, new perspectives ... and of course it needs some kind of pairing assumption that I think the group of creativity that was forming represented. What made you make this proposal?

- A: I remember the moment that I offered the idea of creativity. I remember the energy, but I did not think it would resonate with other people. It was in the hope that I could have fun and not be in an intellectual group. I do too much thinking, and wanted a different experience. I also felt that this was a place I could play.
- D: Apart from a coffee we took together, I think there is a moment that you contributed to the creation of working intimacy in the creativity group. It was when you openly shared with us a personal dilemma outside the conference. A question out of the task but it worried you in that moment ... What do you think?
- A: Yes I agree, bringing something personal opened a new door to trust. The way the group responded so warmly made me feel an insider, part of the group. Usually I feel a visitor in other people's work.
- D: For me it was not only something personal, but a working issue because it affected the internal process of the group. By the way, Angela, what makes you feel connected to people at work?
- A: Apart from connecting through a shared task, it is a shared sense of the humour, or informal exchanges that seem to have a deeper resonance than task relationship; and you?
- D: To share perspectives and world visions with my colleagues. Although that does not ensure the creation of a working intimacy, it is a previous condition. For example, a significant experience in Belgirate was being in contact with other colleagues of GR Netherland with whom I occasionally work. This contributed to my understanding of what similarities/differences there are in our perspectives, and what we have in common.
- A: How have you found this virtual working intimacy that we are trying to create while writing the chapter?
- D: Sincerely, my feeling is that being in a virtual relationship diminishes the intensity of working intimacy. It is not easy and requires more persistence. And you?
- A: Yes, it has been hard to manage a connection through distance and time. I feel we had to struggle, but when we did connect through Skype it came alive.
- D: Yes, I agree.

### *Some thoughts about intimacy*

"Intimacy" is one of those words that practical experience and definitions are hard to pin down. Even so, the concept has been incorporated

naturally into our everyday language and we associate it vaguely with "private", "personal", "close", "family", "near", etc. Etymologically it comes from the Latin "*intimus*", referring to something very ("*-mus*") internal ("*inti-*").

There are many theories, and much research, which discuss the need to create and maintain interpersonal relationships. Freud, Maslow, Bowlby, and other authors have studied, through various prisms and in depth, the empirical evidence in this field (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hazan & Shaver, 1994a; Reis, 1990). They all note that humans, as eminently social beings, have for various reasons a need and desire to form social bonds and that intimacy is a characteristic attribute of these close relationships.

The concept of "intimacy" strongly suggests a movement into the private terrain. Many intimate issues are naturally associated as private, but at the moment we share them with other people they become more public, though they can still remain intimate. At this point, private or public is a better description, and the amount of privacy depends on the amount of inclusion that others are allowed. The grade of intimacy grows according to the emotional value it has in relation to the sight of others. For example, I can have some pictures of mine that are private and intimate, but at the moment I publish them on the internet they become public, although they still remain intimate. Anyway, in both cases intimacy or privacy cannot be conceived without the presence of an "other", so it is a social phenomenon.

In most of the theories, we see that the creation of relationships of intimacy is associated with satisfactory states of happiness and personal well-being (McAdams & Bryant, 1987). We appreciate that these investigations have principally examined "intimacy" from the domain of relationships between "persons", avoiding the perspective of the role as a construct. This mediates between the person and the principal task of the system. We think that this ambiguity has brought with it confusion and difficulties in daily organisational management.

#### *Our perspective: working intimacy*

Dealing with any human working system starts from the premise that relationships of intimacy among its members can be both a favourable factor and a difficulty in achieving the task. We understand that relationships of intimacy become favourable when the role

relationships and the interests of the shared main task take pre-eminence. For this reason we have chosen to refer to "working intimacy" or "inter-role intimacy". In later sections we shall describe a plausible definition of this term and the conditions which could facilitate its appearance.

However, relationships of intimacy may also represent a distorting factor for the fulfilment of the task. This condition can be found in two possible scenarios:

1. When the relationships cause great conflict between the various members of a work unit, making it plausible that the style of attachment—*anxious-ambivalent* or *avoidant*—may be a factor participating in this process (Bowlby, 1969).
2. When the type of attachment among the members of the work unit is felt from the personal perspective as being very positive, although playing, all unawares, a role contrary to the development of the task.

In both cases, whether in detachment or attachment, our understanding is that there is a very strong relationship of personal intimacy (but not "working intimacy").

In any case, the greater the contact between members of a human work system increases the probability that relationships of intimacy will be generated. The tendency is to pigeon-hole the other into one's valency, in roles of repetition and in *imago-affective* representations (Roma, 2007).

We might define "working intimacy" as a relationship that furthers and improves the work and completing the task. It has a sense of co-operation/collaboration and exists in a culture of shared values and shared understanding of the primary task.

Of course, there is also a shadow side of this "working intimacy". We mean a kind of basic assumption or "as if", when apparently we are on "working intimacy" but we are not. It is as if pairing turns to *baF/F* or *ba P*. It is the "fake intimacy" (Roma, 2007). There are socially accepted patterns stereotypically, where everybody says together, but in reality the apparent intimacy is a defence. This emerges in organisations but also is socially accepted: for example, in the gossip magazines it is as though everybody already has an intimacy with all those famous people, with the king, with this soccer player, etc.

*Some hypotheses from the experience*

As stated above, when we reflected on how we joined the small group we also became interested in the element of choice and unconscious valency. At this point emerged two complementary hypotheses that we have described as:

*Hypothesis One*

If one can *choose* whom to work with, then the wish to relate and have a "working intimacy" has a stronger motivation than when there is an imposed instruction to relate

and/or

*Hypothesis Two*

Due to the unconscious and social dynamics, we make choices that are less free than we would like to imagine.

GR conferences make a contribution to this debate in that it helps people to understand that they cannot make such individual decisions. If you cannot choose your working group, are there some guidelines that facilitate enough intimacy for the work to flourish?

*Hypothesis Three*

"Working intimacy" incorporates the "other" in its multiplicity of facets and dimensions.

Our third hypothesis aims to contribute to the creation of these types of conditions. Contrary to what one might think, establishing a working intimacy with another member does not involve knowing her/his more private side (e.g., gossip events from his/her history), but rather in discovering complexity and being able to identify more shades which enrich the relationship in order to achieve the task. So we pass from a partial view to a more complex perspective.

This complexity might emerge when people involved in a system explore the elements that do not strictly form a part of the principal task to be processed, but underlie it and affect it, namely psychic, social, political, transcendent, or contextual dimensions. For example, this exploration connects with the sense of the morning reflections and associations events in Belgirate.

In our experience, more and more executives are introducing a space for "exploration of the state of the system" before starting the meetings. This has very satisfactory results. In short, these mark the boundary of transition to the main task and invite the construction of working intimacy on the basis of sharing these physical, emotional, and contextual states ... which in some way are present through each one of the members.

At another level of analysis, from our perspective "working intimacy" is a living process and may change over time. One of the outcomes of a group relations conference is the very tight link which many participants end up enjoying. There are not many studies on this aspect, but the recurring experience is that there is a greater intensity in relationships when the conference ends. With the support of new technology, this can be extended for a period until it is eventually weakened by time. However there are cases where very strong and creative relationships have been maintained in the form of projects and very productive business enterprises. It is not unusual, therefore, that among members, the experience of intimacy in the relationships established is an aspect which helps to make this type of seminar a very powerful experience. In addition, we need to recognise the death of the intimacy. The moment a project group or team has completed the task, the process of mourning and loss is in the air. Saying goodbye in Belgirate was tempered with the sense of the tribe meeting again soon at another event. However, that experience was finished, and though we learn to forge relationships we have also learnt to drop them without too much pain. We learn as organisation travellers to pick up and build intimacy appropriate for the task.

*Hypothesis Four*

There is a skill in creating, transforming, and closing working intimacy that should be recognised and appreciated.

Our experience in organisations, as working managers, is that we constantly build and change our relationships in teams, projects, and groups. These are often temporary but with fixed boundaries of role and task. In efficient organisations the project or product has a set time-frame, clear authority, and allocated resources. We have to create and maintain relationships, sometimes intense and under pressure to deliver results. People are put together like an "arranged marriage" and we have to learn how to build working relationships.

### *Implications for our work in group relations conferences and organisations*

From this perspective, there are some inferences, both from group relations experience and from the theory. Working as a consultant or a manager in organisations means we have to pay attention to the formation of groups. The relationship needs to be "healthy", contributing to the task. We need to gauge the tone of this working intimacy to ensure it does not disintegrate to BaP, or BaF/E, or BaD. We have to find ways to develop the connections to speed up the work without forcing people into superficial intimacy. The memory of team games and "icebreakers" makes people averse to enforced bonding.

We also experience that managers are losing a lot of energy trying to build this working intimacy or repairing the detachment processes that sometimes happen in these working teams. We know many cases where these managers understand that they need more personal intimacy and mistakenly invest a considerable sum of money in an outdoor activity or in "team-building". But in general, if people don't understand the differentiation between "role" and "person", then the differentiation between "intimacy" and "working intimacy" cannot be built correctly. There is a phantasy that short-term intimacy in these team-building events will be a permanent mode in the team. However, if the real dynamics (role/authority/power) are not addressed, we know that the previous types of partial relationship can re-emerge with more virulence and destructive potential.

In family business organisations, intimacy can be fundamentally confused, particularly in processes of succession. The excess of interpersonal intimacy, throughout the family history, is so strongly consolidated that the creation of working intimacy can be difficult. More privacy is sometimes connected with a diminished sense of working intimacy.

At the other extreme in larger organisations, the working process and necessary intimacy between colleagues/departments/projects are sabotaged by online communication, via email (even two feet away!). This is an example of technology that can speed communication but avoids working intimacy.

The message which all this conveys is clear. Group relations conferences offer conditions in which, in an existential and intense way, areas of working intimacy are created, completed, and transformed.

Learning the mechanisms of GR—for example, the drive to make contributions and have influence—is a meaningful experience. It is this which can be transferred to the external professional situation. It supports the argument of seeing GR conferences as a valuable place when various members of the same work unit attend together.

Our point is that distinguishing and examining the processes in relationships of intimacy, fake intimacy, and working intimacy is, without doubt, among the themes which must be considered by any institution. Even the Belgrate experience, with experienced participants, can include a phantasy of intimacy.

### *Conclusions*

Building intimacy in a work setting is not often a conscious, defined task. It moves under the radar as a valuable function of team and project work. In exploring this concept, we have alluded to emotional intelligence and a maturity of relatedness. We hope this stimulates a wider debate and more working intimacy in the GR network.

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