

## **BACK TO THE FUTURE**

### **An analysis of key themes of AISA's National Group Relations Conferences and other major programmes: 1987-1999. And an Appendix, including 2000-2003**

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The Australian Institute of Socio-Analysis (AISA) was established in Victoria in 1987 (it was then known as the Australian Institute of Social Analysis). Each year AISA has sponsored (sometimes with other organisations) at least one major group relations conference (and usually other major conferences) in the tradition which emanated from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, London. This framework emerged from the work of Wilfred Bion, A K Rice and others and over the past 55 years has developed and grown internationally. A variety of organisations working in this framework exist in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Europe, India, the USA, South Africa, Israel, Eastern Europe and Australia.

In this paper, I will examine in what I hope is a socio-analytic way, key themes of the major Australian conferences as described in the brochures. I will try to identify trends in the conference themes. I will consider whether particular qualities can be discerned in these themes that might both relate to Australian organisational life (and what this might mean) and might reflect the concerns of contemporary organisations. I will briefly consider the role AISA may play in organisational life in Australia; and try to weigh up whether the history of group relations conferences in Australia can suggest future directions for AISA and for Australian organisations. The analysis will essentially be based on the themes, and primary tasks. Space has not permitted the exploration of other key concepts such as the conference events, the nature of the Directorship and staffing (at least by gender and profession), and sponsorship, which I believe should all be considered.

It would have been reasonable to analyse each conference in turn and to examine the emerging data and the links and connections, but this seemed monotonous and uninviting. I gave some thought to how the data, emerging hypotheses and evidence might be examined and presented in a way that was a socio-analytic approach to thinking and working or that might contribute to growing the "socio-analytic idea". This presented quite a challenge. When I began writing this paper I discovered that I had really taken on a mammoth task for the allotted time of 40 minutes. I had to make the decision that I would initially work only with the themes of each conference as captured in the titles and the stated primary tasks.

The first challenge: engaging socio-analytically with the data. It is more familiar to me to do this with the live material of groups, organisations and social dreams. Based however on the core concepts which currently underpin socio-analysis – psychoanalysis, systems thinking, group relations,

organisational behaviour, social dreaming, I began by approaching the data with some basic hypotheses:

that the conference themes as socio-analytic material represent (in addition to their conscious motives) manifestations of unconscious anxieties or concerns in AISA;

that there are thus systemic/developmental links in the material of different conferences;

that the themes, tasks, events and the staffing of conferences are attempts to engage with these anxieties – either creatively or defensively;

and that AISA acts as a container in our community for the purpose (somewhat split off I fear) of working with particular social anxieties related to the conference themes.

As I began to work on this material I again realised that I had set myself a task that was too extensive for this limited space. I made the decision to work primarily on the first and fourth hypotheses. In a sense hypotheses 2 and 3 are implicit in these, but I think that at a later opportunity they may be worked at in their own right. So essentially I am engaging here with the proposition that AISA is a split-off container for anxieties about organisational life and that the conference themes are manifestations of these anxieties in AISA and in organisational life in the community.

### **Primary Hypothesis:**

*that the conference themes represent unconscious social anxieties or concerns in the community ; and that AISA acts as a split-off social container for working with particular collective anxieties embedded in the conference themes.*

AISA Conferences originate from the group relations conference tradition of the Tavistock/Leicester Conferences. Historically, these conferences were concerned with learning and exploration around the themes of authority, leadership and organisation, including task, roles and boundaries. Early AISA conferences seem to reflect a close relationship with these concepts. Ironically [AISA's first planned conference](#) (which did not run) in 1988 was entitled "Lorne Group Dynamics Conference". Lorne – the picturesque coastal town two hours from Melbourne – has remained the location-in-the-mind (and usually in reality) of AISA's major annual conference. It is still usually distinguished from other events as "the Lorne Conference". The first [actual conference in 1989](#) was entitled along the traditional Tavistock/Leicester lines: "Authority, Leadership and Organisation: a working conference on group dynamics and organisational change."

It is noticeable that the phrase "working conference" is introduced in the subtitle. Conferences generally are understood to be academic meetings where scientific papers are presented. This may be an attempt to delineate the nature of AISA conferences as different than this, as well as to locate the conferences in the world of work and of experiential learning.

In addition to the recurring key concepts of the main title, this conference was about "group dynamics" and "organisational change". Thus these two notions

are identified as related to and important to organisational issues of authority and leadership as well as to each other. The need to explore and work with ideas about organisational change may well reflect not only a burgeoning concern related to organisational life in the eighties but an early recognition of the turbulent future for the organisation of work.

The 1990 and 1991 conference titles began with the same core concept but each explored a different angle: in 1990 the focus was on the “dynamics of groups and organisations” while the 1991 conference attended to “reflection and action in the management of change”. The latter sub-title again focuses on issues of organisational change and the use of the idea of “management” of change may well reflect the experienced anxieties of unmanaged and unmanageable change that began to characterise organisational life at the time (and has undoubtedly not abated). “Reflection and action” stand out as significant concerns. The strongly held conviction emanating from psychoanalysis about the function of thinking, the pain and hatred of thinking and of reality (Bion, 1993) and the need for space to examine what is happening (fearful as it may be) seem embedded in this theme, as well as the managerial requirement for action. Action has in the general community been more highly valued as a means of intervention (especially without reflection), with its capacity for avoidance of psychic pain. The capacity for reflection is highly valued in socio-analytic ways of working. It therefore seems understandable that AISA should be a container for the anxieties associated with collective thinking.

The conference of 1992 had a different – a changed - format to its title: “Management of difference and change in groups and organisations”. Again the notion of management is introduced, but quite centrally. “Difference” and “change” are linked as key concepts in this conference. What is the relation between “difference” and “change”? These concepts hold many possible interpretations. The introduction of the idea of “difference” is interesting: it implies something about “differentiation” which at a group level is a central concern in managing the relationship of the individual to the group. (Main, 19--). My hunch is that the introduction of this idea may reflect a gradually growing awareness of the way people in organisations are viewed: as undifferentiated “resources” – perhaps a foreshadowing of the euphemistically named processes of “downsizing” and “outsourcing”?

The 1993 conference “Managing the institution in the mind: an experiential working conference on authority, leadership and organisation” introduced the notion that organisational members hold a different and shared unconscious construction of the organisation which shapes their collective and individual relation to it. This may continue the theme of differentiation, which seems to be taken up even more distinctively in 1994.

“Authority, leadership and organisation” remain the primary notions, but are strongly underscored by the sub-title “management of self in multiple roles”. I am particularly interested in the introduction of the idea of “self”. I suggest, with the developing notion of differentiation, that it reflects a growing concern with individuation and its various implications – from narcissism to survival

and a turning to oneself to manage rather than to the group (or indeed because of the experience of 'group'). I think that in this connection, it is significant to note that the construct "Basic Assumption Me-ness" (the "fifth basic assumption") emerged particularly clearly at the first Western Australian conference in 1991 on Rottnest Island, with its sub-title of "managing in a setting of isolation". That it emerged vividly in a conference on "isolation" set on an isolated island off the coast of Perth (the most isolated major city in the world) seems to me to parallel the processes of splitting and projective identification which I think underpin AISA's role as a container of social anxieties. A paper on the fifth basic assumption was published in 1996. (Lawrence, Bain and Gould, 1996)

The 1995 conference title moves away from this concern though, and addresses the idea of "reflection in action in creating a responsive organisation". The conscious intent appears to be about the exploration of ways of making organisations more responsive through "reflection in action". I think it also draws attention to the lack of responsiveness in organisations. Here I mean both in a "management" sense (managing complexity and change) and in the capacities of organisations to be in touch with collective and individual concerns and to respond to them.

The conference of 1996 introduced a new notion and a slightly altered format to the main title: "Authority, leadership and succession: organisations planning for the future". Might there be recognition that "reflection" - which implies what *has been* - needs also to engage with "planning" with its sense of what *might be*? And that there is a concern with the future of organisational life? Most of the stated primary tasks of each conference are versions of the title presented in a dual task format - i.e. to learn and to apply one's learning. This conference makes a more explicit link with the broader community. The primary task is "To explore the nature of leadership, authority and organisational succession as they emerge in the conference institution, and to make connections with these issues as they occur in organisations, institutions and Australian society more broadly". The Primary Task of the 1995 conference initiated this: "To provide opportunities to learn about authority and leadership within the conference, and their links to group, organisational and societal dynamics...". Although "application" was always important, these conference tasks suggest that the links between AISA and the community could be more explicit. This is connected with my hypothesis of AISA's being split off.

A quite new notion was introduced in the conference of 1997: "Purpose, passion and task: rediscovering values in organisations". This divergence from the more traditionally structured titles is quite notable. Not only is the structure of the title different in its absence of reference to authority, leadership or organisation, but also the issue of "values" and their "re-discovery" is introduced. "Purpose, passion and task" confronts some of the key challenges facing organisations in the late twentieth century. Each of the major ideas contains complex and rich material. In brief, they raise important questions - at an individual and collective level - about the *raison d'être* of working in contemporary enterprises; about the role and function of passion

with all of its meanings – zeal, enthusiasm, anger and other strong feelings – indeed the place of *affect* at large in organisational life; about the relationship of all of these to the task of work; and about the serious questioning of values as well as ethics in organisational and community life. Yet the primary task quite explicitly limits the study of these major concerns to “within the conference institution”. I have little doubt that the intention is broader but I am struck by the stated limitations, as if reinforcing AISA’s split from the community around these critical issues.

“Managing differences”, the title of the 1998 conference reflects another shift from the conventional format of conference titles. It is in some ways a return to the theme of the 1992 conference and I think again takes up the topic of differentiation or individuation. I suspect that it holds two important strands. Firstly it may reflect - through its recognition of difference - the realisation that there has been a painful loss in the value of humanness in organisational life. The task of “exploring experiences of difference” focuses directly on difference rather than avoiding it. And secondly that of exploring “problems and possibilities encountered in its management” holds hope about our capacity to manage these matters, in the face of de-humanising organisational realities. Notably absent from the title are the traditional notions of authority, leadership and organisation. I offer the hunch that the hope reflected above might reside in the capacities of people at all levels of organisational life to take authority for and from task rather than from hierarchy.

The 1999 conference (which I directed) had as its title “Authority for Learning: a working conference to explore the dynamics of authority, leadership, courage and organisational learning”. The idea of “authority for learning” takes up the theme I have just mentioned from the 1998 conference: where is authority located? And what are the sources of authority? The introduction of the idea of “learning” is not a new one – almost every conference has learning as a central task. However this conference questions the idea of organisational learning – or the popularised notion of the “learning organisation” and questions some central capacities of contemporary collective life. Indeed it raises the question of whether it is possible for collective learning – with the emphasis on “collective” - to occur. The notion of “courage” is introduced and also raises the question of what human qualities are required for managing in contemporary turbulent and complex organisations.

To return, in concluding, to the hypothesis of this paper: that the conference themes represent unconscious social anxieties or concerns in the community; and that AISA acts as a split-off social container for working with particular collective anxieties embedded in the conference themes.

In reviewing the broad sweep of themes that wind their way through the conferences of the last 12 years, I suggest that there is a central underpinning problem. I acknowledge that this paper represents a personal interpretation of the conference themes and I look forward to challenging dialogue about this.

However I am proposing that conference themes emerge from attempts to grapple with a central problem in contemporary society: loss of shared meaning about the nature of leadership, authority and community and about the capacities of those “in authority” to think about, understand, and engage with - in particular - collective human dynamics. That in the face of these organisational anxieties there is retreat from the collective to the “self” which varies from individual creativity in the recognition of difference, through attempts to mobilise passion in the service of “right task” in organisations with values, to narcissism in the form of retreat to “Me-ness”. I further propose that AISA’s conferences over the last 12 years reflect a variety of attempts to engage with and work at this major problem at the end of the 20th century.

In thinking of the future though I draw your attention to the theme of AISA’s first conference of the 21st century: “ The Pair, the Group and the Institution: A Group Relations Conference on Authority, Leadership and Creativity.” In the face of my hypothesised retreat into the isolation of “Me-ness” surely this must offer hope and reparation through creativity and pairing, and creative pairing?

However for AISA to maximise its contribution to Australian society and to organisational life, we will have to think and work very hard at dealing with the ways in which splits from mainstream organisational life occur and may be collusively maintained. We will need to work hard to find ways in which socio-analytic ways of thinking and working (and the subversion of order which characterises them), can be linked with those who lead and manage our organisations and community at many levels. This includes the capacity for thinking and for “not knowing”. Otherwise in the words of Ken Eisold (1996) we may be left “working at the margins...voices in the wilderness”.

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