

## Capturing the ‘Group Voice’ in One of the 2018 EBOR Small Discussion Groups

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Since the EBOR Small Group Facilitators were given a certain amount of leeway in terms of how they conducted the discussion of the two main plenary papers by Lesley Caldwell and Robert Oelsner, I met with some 20 colleagues and made the following proposal: ‘With your permission—and here, we as a group have to be in complete accord, I would like to tape record our two meetings today, so that I might listen to the tape a few days from now—not as a group facilitator, but as a group participant—so that I might hazard a guess about what some of the underlying group dynamic themes are in our discussion. No names or confidential clinical material will be used, and I only make this proposal because I have been experimenting with different ways to make conference discussions a bit more emotionally lively and engaging.’

No sooner had this proposal been made when one member vigorously objected to the idea of being recorded, as it might disrupt the flow of the discussion and be compromising to any sense of 1-to-1 dialogue. Other members of the group took up this objection, saying that they were interested in experimenting with potentially livelier ways of having a small group discussion. The objecting colleague felt willing to then consent to the idea of being taped—and we began our discussion.

With this somewhat tense beginning, members made first-person disclosures pertaining to the conference paper theme, first broached by Caldwell’s paper on the body: breathing, the kind of breathing one does at conferences, one’s own voice and its sound, the notion of the ‘group breathing together.’ Is it deep or is it shallow? What does it mean to ‘inhale’ a paper, or ‘exhale’ what one doesn’t find useful or necessary? Sometimes we notice a patient’s ‘exhale’ as a sign that they feel either relieved emotionally or understood or both. A physician colleague talked about how as interns and residents, the idea of examining the body carefully is a sort of first principal. In short, close attention is paid to the physical manifestations of a body under examination. There were questions about the body of the analyst, and the body of the patient. How does one body engage another? There was the question of all the bodies in the room. How are we breathing—as one or as disparate members of a group?

In the afternoon session after Robert Oelsner’s paper, there was a shift in the group dynamic. Some members felt emotionally jolted by Bion’s ironic ending of the *Memoir of the Future*, when he wished the reader ‘Happy Holocaust.’ The themes raised were: the dangers of climate change, the dangerous demagogic political landscape of the U.S., death and boredom, both real and in the consulting room; the death of close colleagues and relatives; and the inevitable death of our small group at the end of the afternoon.

One dramatic point occurred when a member took up what he expected to be some points of clinical friction or conflict between the two plenary presenters. Contrary to expectation, it seemed like the two main presenters were getting on with one another—and at one point, Oelsner even suggested that they might take a stroll together. At this very point in the meeting, Oelsner walked in the door to spend a few minutes with our group. So, his presence was immediately played in: the member spoke of expecting friction between mommy and daddy, perhaps casting

himself as an interloper in the parental intercourse—only to have his hopes dashed! Oelsner took this in good humor, reiterating that he had studied Winnicott's works quite extensively, but naturally, he took only what was necessary from Winnicott's work. With that, his time was up and he had to leave to attend other small group meetings.

So, how would I sum up these rich group experiences? Taking all these impressions in hand, it seems to me that one way—and it is only one of many possible ways—to capture this rich emotional experience might be to say that we (as a group) started by 'inhaling' the initial papers, using whatever psychic and emotional nutrients it provided, and then 'exhaling' the second paper in the later afternoon. To what extent were we 'inspired' by the lively group discussion; to what extent did we collectively feel that we as a group were about to 'expire' at the end of the afternoon—an emotional point made all the more poignant by the fact that the initial objecting member from the 1<sup>st</sup> session, did not return for the 2<sup>nd</sup> one.

On my return home, I have listened to the recordings of both tapes one time each—and I continue to feel that this group 'breathing' metaphor captured a good deal of the group's emotional experience as a whole.

I forgot Caldwell and Oelsner's appearance in our group meetings.