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# The Psycho-Dynamics of an Inter-Group Experience\*

### *Introduction*

This paper offers an analysis of processes that occur between groups collaborating on a task of direct relevance to an objective they have in common. Theoretically it is based on the work of Bion (1961) who distinguishes between two levels of group activity: that of the “sophisticated” or “work” group (*W*), which involves learning and development and addresses specific tasks that must be met and undertaken in social reality; and that of the *basic assumptions*—dependence (*baD*), fight/flight (*baF*) and pairing (*baP*)—which are unlearned, primitive emotional response systems existing as unconscious patterns that alternate with each other. The basic group organization may be in conflict with the sophisticated or *W* organization, and is often unrecognized by members of the group, whose level of performance may be severely impaired in consequence. A detailed exposition and critique of his views is given by Sutherland (Vol. 1, “Bion Revisited”) who also explains such psychoanalytic concepts as projection and introjection, extensive use of which is made in this paper.

The setting of the Inter-Group Exercise, as it was called, was a two-week Tavistock/Leicester Group Relations Training Conference (Trist and Sofer, 1959; Rice, 1965; Miller, Vol. 1, “Experiential Learning in Groups I”). The conference, held in November 1959, was the second such conference. The core experience had been the “study groups.” The Inter-Group Exercise was added to investigate inter-group behavior.

The ideal experience for this purpose would be to analyze inter-group processes in real-life situations. This is not possible in a training setting. At the other extreme were case-study/role-playing activities. The Inter-Group Exercise attempted to find an experience somewhere between these two poles. It provided a task that was real within the conference setting, but which lacked the degree of commitment or emotional involvement that a real-life situation

\*A shortened version of the original—*Human Relations*, 17:391–446, 1964.

would evoke. It did, however, create something that was more meaningful and powerful than is possible with a case-study procedure, or even with the more exciting "business game" type of event.

The overall task was to decide on a program of special interest sessions to take place in the second week of the conference. Members were to divide themselves into three groups which would work together in a self-chosen fashion to achieve an agreed program. The Exercise was analogous to what goes on in ordinary working groups. There was a concrete decision to be taken that would affect all the participants. They would experience the results of their decisions. The Exercise was developed by Bridger as a result of previous work with Glidewell of the National Training Laboratories at Bethel.

The conference was held at a large hotel in a small spa in the north of England. To qualify for membership an individual had to be currently in a post of responsibility. Twenty-nine members took part: four prison governors, five lecturers in education, five industrial executives; two hospital sister-tutors; six personnel or training managers in industry; seven applied social scientists from European institutions. Members had been asked on their application forms to suggest topics of particular interest to them which might be taken up during the special interest sessions. There were eight full-time staff, two from the University of Leicester and six from the Tavistock Institute.

Eight 1½-hour sessions would be devoted to the Exercise, which was to start on the afternoon of the second day. By this time the members would have experienced two study groups and one theory session. In the first session of the Exercise members would decide on a method of dividing themselves into three groups, X, Y and Z. Division into study groups was excluded, but any other type of division was allowable.

A questionnaire would evaluate the decisions reached by the groups at various points in the Exercise: the willingness of group members to carry out these decisions; and the degree of satisfaction with the way their group had arrived at them. This evaluation instrument was used five times, the results being made known to the groups.

Each group would proceed in its own way and would have attached to it a staff observer. The observers would help the groups achieve their tasks and were free to make group-centered comments. They had a recording role as a secondary function. The staff not directly concerned as observers formed a separate group. The resources of the whole staff were offered for use during the special interest sessions.

For the second and third sessions groups would devise a system of communicating with each other by means of envoys. The envoys would reach agreement on a single consolidated plan for the special interest sessions. In the fourth session, all the groups would evaluate their experience during the planning stages. The fifth, sixth and seventh sessions would be devoted to

carrying out the program decided upon. The eighth would evaluate the members' experience.

### *The Exercise*

#### FORMATION OF THE GROUPS

The Exercise took place in the ballroom of the hotel, a large room 54 ft. × 47 ft. In the center of one of the long sides was a small stage and about 12 feet into the dance floor there were two large pillars about four feet square. The rest was clear.

The first session opened with the conference members seated in an irregular group in front of the stage but on the far side of the two pillars. The staff were along the front of the stage at floor level with the conference director standing in front of them facing the members. In the haphazard seating a group of seven or eight were to the side of one of the pillars. There was no-one outside the other pillar.

The Exercise was opened by the conference director running over the instructions. There were several requests for further clarification. Two new points were introduced. First, although members of the staff were willing to provide whatever help they could, the conference was reminded that there were resources among the members themselves relevant to many of the special interests listed. Secondly, that the first phase of the Exercise—to arrive at a decision about the basis for dividing into the three groups—should take no longer than 15 minutes. The conference director then said that the Exercise should start immediately and that within 15 minutes the members should have decided on what basis they would split up into groups.

What happened in the next minute or so was unexpected and crucial. After a short pause a member asked what the groups X, Y and Z were to do. The director explained this again. Immediately, somebody else asked about the role of the staff during the first part of the Exercise when the three groups were working separately. This, too, was answered. Then came a question as to whether the groups were to deal with content or were to just set a program without content. The director answered that they were asked to do what they themselves considered to be a planning job and to deal with content or not as they thought fit. In finishing, he reminded them that they now had 14 minutes left to decide on a means of forming into groups.

Immediately Z1, an industrial member, said that in industry those responsible for making such a decision would have the advice and help of staff. There was anger in his voice. While he was speaking, the small group of people who were to the outside of the pillar stood up and moved their chairs around to join

the main body so that they could participate more easily. At the same time the members of staff, except the three who were to operate as the group observers, and the conference director, stood up and moved off to that part of the hall designated for the staff group. These movements precipitated other movements, some members standing up and picking up their chairs. Immediately after *Z1* had finished, a member said in a loud voice, "Let's do it alphabetically." He was disregarded. The general stir of movement suddenly increased and within seconds one group of people were heading towards one corner of the room while another were heading for the diagonally opposite corner; in the middle some were standing and some sitting. This central group was made up mainly of those who had come around from behind the pillar. The two groups who had moved were in the corners nominated as *X* and *Z* and the two observers for these groups moved off to join them. The third observer joined those in the middle of the floor. In this way, within 15 seconds, the division had been made without any conscious decision as to how it should be done.

A minute or so later, the group in the middle of the floor, with their observer, moved over to the vacant corner nominated for *Y*. In the *X* corner there were 10 people, in the *Y* eight and in the *Z* 11. All groups then filled out the evaluation sheets regarding the group division process.

## PLANNING SESSIONS

### SESSION ONE

*X*: *X* had a rather sharp division of opinion about electing a chairman but did finally elect one. They fell into detailed discussion of the special interest items and developed two noticeable factions. The two factions seemed to be fairly clear what they were falling out about and reached a compromise solution. To achieve this the group took a vote, but they were not content with voting and did not use it again.

The reaction of *X* to the results of the questionnaire was one of interest; they were particularly struck by the great degree of dissatisfaction reported by *Y*. It was as a result of this information that they decided to make an offer to *Y* of repeating the original division exercise. In this action they showed some awareness of the other groups' reaction to the initial break-up, and of their own position.

*Y*: *Y* were the last to move to their corner. They gathered there in a noticeably dispirited fashion after an initial burst of indignation and sat around rather at a loss what to do next. There was some desultory discussion and lapses into

silence. The group became a little more lively when they got the results of the first questionnaire. These showed that they were noticeably below the level of the others in their satisfactions about the initial division into groups. It was about this time that an envoy arrived from *X* to report that, while his own group were content with the division, they had noticed the low satisfaction on the part of *Y* and offered, if *Y* wished, to join them in repeating the first part of the Exercise. *Y*'s reaction was to perk up a little but to say that, although they were unhappy, they would continue as they were.

The boost in their morale from this incident was not very lasting and after a time they relapsed into fragmentary conversation and periods of silence. After one of these long silences one member produced the outline of a plan for reconciling the special interests of members and for an organization through which the conference might take account of them in the following week's sessions.

The plan was taken up by some but others paid no attention. A division showed itself between those who were active in the planning task and those who were quite silent, out of touch and apparently depressed. The observer reported that several appeared to be quite shocked with the experience they had had in the initial division. Towards the end of the session the group, in a rather casual way, elected a chairman. It was this member (*Y1*) and the member who had originally produced the outline plan (*Y2*) who later became the envoys for *Y*.

*Z*: *Z* became active as soon as they got to their corner and by the time the observer arrived had already elected a chairman and secretary. They spent the first session arguing volubly over the details of the listed special interest topics. Their reaction to the report of the first questionnaire was one of passing interest only. They seemed hardly aware of any significance it might have and continued with their compulsive inspection of the special interests. Various members took on the roles of "sneerer" at the others and at the whole Exercise; of "clown"; and of withdrawn non-participant. There was little member satisfaction. Two distinct factions were apparent but neither was clear what were the differences between them.

The only movement between the groups during the first session was that of the envoy who went from *X* to *Y*.

#### SESSION TWO

*X*: *X* had had an extra meeting before this session. It turned out to be of little value. They simply went over the ground they had already covered. When they

were given the results from the questionnaire, the chairman noticed that there were two members who had expressed dissatisfaction. He did all he could to get them to declare themselves, which they did not do. *X* were the first group to send members outside to make contact with other groups. Their first contact was with the staff to ask questions about the resources available for possible special interest sessions. *X* were also the first to make contact with the other groups, particularly *Y*, in connection with arranging the envoys' meeting. *X*, unlike *Y* and *Z*, gave their envoys the status only of delegates, not of fully responsible representatives.

While the envoys' meeting was taking place, the remainder of the group discussed their own activities to date and the manner in which they had behaved as a group. They thought of contacting the other two groups during this period and explaining to them the plan that *X* had made for presentation at this first envoys' meeting.

The group were eager to hear from their envoys—"How have we done?" The envoys' report sharpened their interest in and commitment to their own plan when they heard that other plans had been put up. They decided that theirs was the best and were determined to defend it and have it carried as the plan for the conference as a whole. *X* showed considerable glee at the news of a split in *Z*. The chairman of *X* was eager that they should come to a decision about their reactions to the plans of the other groups but the group decided that they could not discuss this in the time remaining and resolved to have an extra session before the formal session on the following day.

*Y*: *Y*'s chairman had had an informal meeting with two other members to discuss the planning problem further. This piece of extra work was useful in the development of the planning task but was not approved by the majority, who felt it was a private meeting that should not have been held without the knowledge of the whole group.

The two factions showed themselves again, one being active in the planning task, the other withdrawn. *Y* made several approaches to the staff group—to obtain information on the course of the Exercise and on the supposed rulings about the nature of staff participation in the special interest sessions. They were also concerned with exploring the roles that the staff might take in the meetings of envoys. The *Y* envoys were the first to emerge onto the center of the floor for the initial envoys' meeting. While the envoys were away the rest of the group fell into a withdrawn, inactive silence.

The members of the group were eager to have a report from their envoys. They, like *X*, showed great glee on hearing that there was a split in *Z*. They also showed considerable delight in what they took to be the good report of useful activity by their two envoys.

Z: At the opening of the session, the chairman of Z offered to resign because he thought he was doing the job badly. He was *ZI*, the man who had played a significant part in triggering the original division of the groups. His offer was not accepted. The group then had the report on the questionnaire. Several members declared that the group as a whole had reported rather a lower level of satisfaction than they felt was true. There were some jokes about their all being hypocrites, which faded away into languid and unsystematic activity. Z were slow in sending their envoys to the first central meeting. Those of both *X* and *Y* were out on the floor waiting for them and making signs to hurry up. They clearly felt persecuted by these demands. The envoys they did send included the leader of the minority within themselves. They went off with a very unclear brief.

The mood of the remaining group members noticeably relaxed. They became much easier with each other and with their observer. This was the first time they took account of the observer. They showed no interest at all in the envoys' meeting. Nor did they show any interest in their envoys' report when they came back. The minority leader commented that he thought that *Y*'s plan was very much the best.

Apart from the envoys' meeting in the middle of the hall, there had been several contacts by *X* and *Y* with each other and with *Z*, and also with the staff board. Except for sending out their envoys, late and under pressure, *Z* had not initiated any external contacts.

The first envoys' meeting was taken up with the presentation of plans by each set of envoys. Those submitted by *X* and *Y* were fairly comprehensive. That of *Z* was little more than a confused catalogue.

*Z* let it be known that there was a split within their group. The leader of the *Z* minority, who was one of their envoys, asked the staff member present if members could change groups during the Exercise. Both the other groups drew the conclusion that *Z* was internally riven and was not a serious contender for making a viable plan. *X* and *Y* each decided that the other was the main competitor.

### SESSION THREE

*X*: Between the second and third sessions *X* had another extra session. This proved to be rather more useful than that of the day before. They became absorbed with whether their envoys should be representatives or delegates. They decided that they should be representatives, but without full authority beyond given limits. These limits were never clearly defined. The group asked for, and were granted, the right for their envoys to refer back to them if the

central meeting took them outside the brief they had been given. The group had agreed that they could ignore Z. They decided that they could handle Y by means of a compromise that would not undermine the nature of the X plan.

After their envoys left, the remaining members set out rather enthusiastically on a scheme for research on what had gone on within their group during the course of the Exercise. This project did not get very far because the director invited the remaining members of all three groups to come to the center and act as a silent audience to the final envoys' meeting. X were particularly incensed by this because they had become interested in doing their own research. They angrily declared that the director had changed the rules; however, they did join the central envoys' group. In the course of this meeting, one of the X envoys retired with his group to take advice on a point that had come up that was beyond their brief.

Y: Y held an extra meeting the material from which is reported with that from the third official meeting below. The chairman said he had spoken to the chairmen of the other two groups and suggested that there be a staff chairman for the envoys' meeting. The group did not take this point up enthusiastically. The chairman also suggested that the members of Y might have some informal contact with the other two groups to try to win them over to Y's plan.

Y were noticeably pleased with themselves about their plan, which they thought was very much the best. The discussion now took on a political color, the group deciding that they could ignore Z. Their task in carrying through their plan would be to overcome the alternative bid from X.

The term "reparation" was used for the first time in connection with Y's analysis of the relationships of the other two groups to themselves; they ascribed guilt to them for what they had done at the expense of Y in the initial break-up. However, Y were against their chairman's suggestion of pressing their advantage by attempts to convert the other two groups to their point of view. They condemned this as propagandist.

YI continued to explore with the other two groups the possibility of having a staff chairman for the envoys' group. He got sufficient agreement from X for this plan, but could get no sense out of Z. Some of the members of the non-active, rather depressed, section of Z did not know which of the other groups was which.

Z: Z went through an experience of considerable confusion and strife. They had great difficulty in getting a sufficient briefing for their envoys to take to the central meeting, which caused them to be late for it. They experienced as extremely irritating intrusions the attempts of the other groups to hurry them along. Indeed, the outstanding characteristic of this session was Z's feeling of anger towards the other groups and the staff, and their strong sense of being persecuted by them all.

At the final central meeting, the Z envoys had nothing to offer as a direct contribution to the plan for the special interest sessions, although they played an important part in the process of compromise that went on between X and Y. The next step towards putting the plan into force was to be a further meeting of the group envoys, after they had consulted with their groups, for the purpose of nominating a planning committee. The whole of Z, who had overheard this discussion, misunderstood and thought that the next meeting was to be of the planning committee. They therefore sent two members other than their envoys to this meeting. Faced with this situation, the envoys of X and Y accepted, not only these two nominees, but the original Z envoys on the planning committee. In this way, Z provided half of the eight members of the planning committee.

During the second envoys' meeting, the political alignment that had emerged showed itself from the start. The X and Y envoys were very sharply in competition. Both pairs showed confidence and determination to carry the day. The Z envoys played a much more subdued part, siding at one time with X and at another with Y and, towards the end of the meeting, withdrawing altogether and allowing the final X and Y confrontation to take place. The outcome was seen as a victory for Y—certainly in the eyes of the members of Y, whose envoys gained the political advantage over the X envoys who needed to withdraw to seek a further mandate from their group.

The two Y envoys also played their parts well in a complementary way. Y1, their chairman, was an aggressive and determined speaker. There was going to be an impasse if there was not some show of meeting the compromise that X were offering, with Z support. Y2, the woman member, took over and, with equal determination but much more gentleness, carried the Y position through the compromise situation with success. The outcome was an amalgam of the X and Y plans. Each group later claimed the major victory for itself—but the sense of success was greater with Y.

### *The Evaluation Instrument and Its Results*

#### THE INSTRUMENT

The evaluation sheet contained three questions only: how satisfied were you with the decision made by the group; how willing were you to carry out the decision of the group; and how satisfied were you with the way the group worked on the problem. Respondents were asked to put a tick against one point on a five-point scale, varying from high satisfaction through neutral to low. The instrument was used on five occasions:

Evaluation Sheet 1 was given immediately after the division into groups, when each of the three groups went to its respective corner of the ballroom.

The decision referred to was that of the conference as a whole in splitting up into groups.

Evaluation Sheet 2 was completed at the end of the first session when the groups had agreed on an outline of a plan. It referred to this internal group decision.

Evaluation Sheet 3 referred to the work of the central envoy group as reported back to *X*, *Y* and *Z*. It was due to be given at the end of the second session after the first inter-group meeting. There was some confusion about this and, in fact, it was filled out at the beginning of the next conference session some two hours later.

Evaluation Sheet 4 was completed within the groups again, and referred to the revised plans that the groups sent to the final envoys' meeting after they had been informed about the plans of the other groups.

Evaluation Sheet 5 applied to the work of the final envoys' meeting that decided on the overall conference plan.

The recording counted responses to the three questions. The procedure was to arrive at an algebraic sum of all the positive and all the negative responses, ignoring those that fell at the neutral point. To allow comparison between the groups, which were of different sizes, these final figures were put on a base of ten. The ordinates for the "graphs" on which the results were reported were the indices for each of the groups on the five occasions when the evaluation sheets were filled out. A simple scale of +10 to -10 was used for each of the reactions asked about.

#### COMMENT

The three groups produced characteristically different graphs (Figure 1). The greatest change over time is shown by *Y* and the least by *X*. For the two questions dealing with satisfaction about decisions, with the exception of *Y*'s first reaction, all group responses are at the top end of the positive side of the scale, and all show less variation than do the other judgments.

*X*: *X* showed less variation on all questions than did the other groups and an alternating reaction to the same questions as the Exercise developed. They felt slightly less satisfaction about decisions made within their own group than about those made by the inter-group envoy sessions. They began with a high level of expressed willingness to implement, which rose to a maximum following the first inter-group meetings—at which they thought they had done rather well—and tailed off only slightly thereafter.

*Y*: The *Y* graphs are the most dramatic. The group's reaction to the initial break-up decision was 100 percent negative. However, by the time they made a

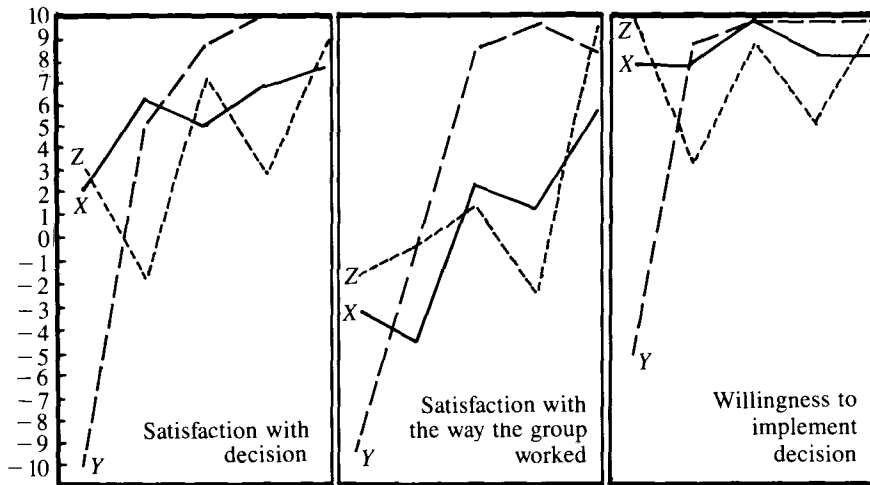


Figure 1. Evaluation sheet results

second report, which had to do with their own internal work as a planning group, their level of satisfaction had changed markedly and took them half way up the positive side of the scale. Thereafter they continued to improve, finding themselves 100 percent on the positive side after their second internal planning session—a level they held to the end of the Exercise. Their unwillingness to implement decisions was never as great as their dissatisfaction with the decisions themselves. Their willingness to implement their own and the inter-group decisions was high and remained high until the end of the Exercise.

Z: The graphs for Z reveal interesting variations. The responses expressing satisfaction with, and willingness to implement, decisions taken in the inter-group arena reached a high level, with corresponding low points for the responses concerning their own decisions. The exception to this zig-zag pattern occurs with their satisfaction about the way the groups worked on problems. Here they showed themselves rather negative to the first break-up decision, neutral about themselves in their first planning session, a little more positive about the first inter-group session, slipping back to dissatisfaction in reflecting on their own second internal planning session, but reaching a maximum of satisfaction regarding the way the final conference decision was taken.

### *Evaluation Sessions*

The first evaluation session started as a plenary for the whole conference, taking the form of a general discussion on the planning sessions. It went on for

about 20 minutes. *X*, *Y* and *Z* then met independently with their observers and spent another 20 minutes in group reviews and evaluations. The whole conference then reconvened and the graphs depicting the evaluation sheet returns were made available. There was now much more interchange of views about the inter-group relationships.

The second session was entirely a plenary discussion, led by the conference director. It covered all aspects of the Exercise and of its product for the three special interest sessions. This is given in the Appendix.

### *Analysis and Interpretation*

#### FORMATION OF THE GROUPS

Because of its sudden and dramatic nature, the details of this had not been fully recorded. As many members of the conference as possible, therefore, were informally contacted the next day and asked to give short statements both of their recollection of the event and of their feelings about it. These were recorded anonymously by a secretary:

*X*: "Someone said 'come along' and most of the rest got up and moved either to *Z* or *X* corners. A group . . . moved towards the middle to take part in a general discussion and found . . . the group formation had already taken place. They became group *Y*. . . . *ZI* stood up and made a remark—he was the only one who did—that in industry there would be a leader who would select people to form his group. . . . When people rose following (*ZI*'s) statement . . . I found myself swept into an informal group which settled itself in that corner of the room." "I was feeling pretty sore about the complete organization . . . I did not really want to cooperate and thought we should rebel . . . I wanted to be the leader of a rebellious group . . . I felt a kind of anger."

*Y*: "Suddenly two groups were formed, leaving a very small number of us who had a very interesting feeling of rejection and of being leftovers, the unwanted . . . It took us, who turned out to be *Y*, some time to recover our balance. One member of the group was shocked into a state of non-participation. The total development in the group was made by not more than four of its members. . . . All through the time we were trying to develop a proposal we felt quite dissatisfied with ourselves and with the proposal . . . then we sent our delegates to the general meeting and they came back each feeling about seven feet high. The proposals we had made were greatly superior to the proposals made by the other groups."

*Z*: "We were all left in the center of the room with no one at all taking direction; everyone obviously feeling very lost and rather perplexed . . . there seemed to

be a rapid movement towards one corner of the room . . . persons that eventually formed groups X and Z sat down in their respective corners leaving the remainder in the center of the room, who were both amazed and angry . . . they willy-nilly were forced to become the third group. Most people seemed to think that probably a random method of selection for groups was the best way of doing it, although at the time they would have liked a little direction in order to obtain this.”

#### INTERPRETIVE COMMENT

The first session of the Inter-Group Exercise was in the late afternoon of the second day when the members were, as a group, suffused with a basic assumption of dependence (*baD*). This *ba* was suddenly confronted at the beginning of the Inter-Group Exercise with an apparent betrayal by the conference leadership that was the object of the dependence. The group were put into a situation in which they had to take a decision for themselves. They were not prepared for this and the basic assumption of flight (*baF*) immediately took over, frustrating the development of a task-oriented work (*W*) process.

The group were given two tasks: to take a decision about the principle on which the Inter-Group Exercise groups would be formed—this to take no more than 15 minutes—and the action of actually forming the groups. Faced with this situation, some members were prepared to tackle the first, but the majority were not, and they immediately flew to the second under the dominance of *baF*.

The minority who resisted this flight into action and stayed in the center of the floor were prepared to undertake the first task. Once the flight had occurred, however, and these eight people experienced their exposure, they too succumbed to flight from the situation in which they had been left.

The quotations given above demonstrate the rebellious anti-organizer fight aspect of this basic assumption. The rationale the members gave for their behavior was, first, that the organizers had been aggressive by giving them a job to do that they considered to be both too difficult and inappropriate; and, second, that it was not possible for such a group to reach a decision in the time given.

#### GUILT AND REPARATION

The following quotation is from private notes made by the conference director during the course of the first session:

Ask X, Y and Z how they felt about the results. Possible interpretation that X and Y could proceed more actively with the task because of the gesture made by X to