

# **Small Groups and Big Nations: Politics and Leadership from the Perspective of the Small Study Group**

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One of the most difficult aspects of attending a Group Relations conference comes after it is all over, when we try to figure out what we have learned. One feels that one has had a profound experience, that one has learned something important, but it is hard to say what it is. It is even harder to figure out what to do with what one has learned once one has figured it out, largely because the learning is emotional, more about feelings than propositions.

Because I am a political theorist, it has been helpful to me to frame what I have learned in the categories of politics. Not the politics of Congress, parties, and elections, but the fundamental categories of politics: the relationship between individual and group, and the role of leadership in mediating this relationship. In sharing this perspective with the reader, I hope that it will help the reader make some connections between his or her experiences at Group Relations conferences and the political world: not just the politics of nations, but the politics of organizations and families as well. There is hardly anything we do with other people that isn't political, and the family is the first small group.

First, I will argue that the Small Study Group (sometimes called the Tavistock group, after the institute in England where this method of group study originated) is the original state of nature. Before we are individuals, we are group members. The first group is the mother and child, and it goes from there. Seen from this perspective, most who have talked about group life have it wrong. The problem is not convincing people to suppress their individuality in the service of the group. The problem is helping individuals separate from the group while still remaining members of it. All of this may sound obvious, but hardly a single political theorist admits it. It goes against the teachings of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the leading state of nature theorists, as they are called.

All philosophers argue that the problem is to socialize natural man. Freud (1961) made a similar argument in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. I say desocialize natural man, and natural woman too (Alford, 1994).

Second, I will analyze the relationship between leader and group, in order to show how good leaders can help groupies become individual members. Some may object that the consultant is not a real leader, and should