

*An Open Letter to a potential attendee at an
A.K. Rice Group Relations Conference*

Robert Bart

Dear First Timer:

So you're thinking about attending your first A.K. Rice Conference. You may be wondering how it can help you improve your personal and professional effectiveness. If so, this informal letter is intended for you.

Why are you writing this?

The short answer is, "Because I wish someone had written it for me when I was deciding if I wanted to attend!" People were quite generous in recommending books and articles that ultimately turned out to be quite useful, but I initially wanted something brief and easy that would help put the A. K. Rice experience into context.

What are your qualifications to write this?

Let me start with some "nots." I'm not an expert on A. K. Rice theory and practice, although I have attended two A. K. Rice conferences (a national ten day session several years ago and a recent three day weekend event sponsored by the A. K. Rice Institute, Texas Center). I'm not a member of the A. K. Rice Institute, although I may someday apply. I was not asked or authorized by anyone other than myself to write this.

The point is that I have some experience with A. K. Rice, but not so much that I've forgotten what it's like the first time. Also, my education (Industrial/Organizational Psychology) and job experience (training and development for an international petroleum company) are directly related to the development of individuals, groups and organizations. Of course, the real question is not my qualifications, but whether what I have to say will be useful to you. You will know the answer to that question soon enough.

So what is an A.K. Rice conference all about?

An A. K. Rice conference provides an opportunity to become more aware of unconscious group processes. When we are in groups, we think and do lots of things that seem strange-because they are strange or, at least, irrational. At a conference, we can begin to see what's really going on when people make jokes at others' expense, or seat themselves at the head of a table, or find themselves unable to make a group decision about even trivial things (e.g., "Where should we go for lunch?")

I want to learn more about that "unconscious and irrational stuff," but first tell me why it's important to get into all of that?

Through self-awareness comes the freedom to behave in different and more productive ways! If you automatically and without awareness act as the "good mother," or "hard-line pragmatist" in a group, you are condemned to always play that role even when a different stance may be far more effective. Without awareness, choices are indeed

limited. The underlying assumption is that more effective people recognize they have choices in how they can behave in a situation.

I'm beginning to get it, but it's still fuzzy.

No doubt. A lot of this stuff is fuzzy, but nonetheless real and important. Let me try an analogy to see if this helps. Imagine that you are a systems analyst charged with making a computer program more effective. For this to happen, you must:

#1-Recognize that you are the programmer. Someone else *may have* written the original program, and it may be *a mess*, but you *must* be aware that you *can* change the program.

#2-Write the program. Before the program can be re-written, you must understand how the original program operates and what you want to *accomplish* through re-writing it.

#3-Run the program. It's not enough to merely write *the* code, the program must be run.

Do you see how this analogy applies to improving your personal and professional effectiveness? The same three steps need to occur. Improvement begins with an acceptance that you are responsible for your life "program." Others (e.g., parents, media, spouse, boss) significantly influence your program (in both wonderful and dysfunctional ways), but you remain responsible and accountable for your own behavior. Others have the capacity to *influence* your behavior, but not to *determine it*.

In an A. K. Rice conference, we become increasingly aware of the many ways that our behaviors are influenced-by others in the current group and by ideas we carry around with us. The intent is for each of us to understand when we are behaving automatically, so that we can learn that we have a choice to behave in a different way.

OK, I understand that it's essential that I accept responsibility and accountability for my actions. What about your second point, "Write the program?" At the conference will I spend a lot of time writing a personal mission statement and figuring out what's most important to me? Will I leave with personal affirmations and a new script for my life?

Whew! You might, but you will have done those things on your own time. Most of the time in the conference is devoted to understanding what's going on at that particular moment so that you can examine the programs that typically run unconsciously within you. Remember that before programmers can re-write a program they must know how the original program works!

That makes sense, but could you provide a few examples of what you mean by unconscious programs?

Sure, here are three of many possible examples:

Projection. Often we project onto others what is really within us. Have you ever had anyone berate you for being insensitive to others' feelings and not genuinely caring about what they think? The person doing the berating goes on and on. Eventually, you realize that the person doesn't give a hoot about what you feel or think and is really talking about himself. That person has projected his own insensitivity onto others as a way to avoid dealing with **it** within himself. The best example of projection is contained in the famous Pogo quote, "We have met the enemy, and they is us." Unlike in other sectors of the real world, at a conference you can expect to receive unrelenting feedback from others about what you might be projecting onto them.

Valence. Some people have a valence or attraction for certain roles. For example, some individuals are easily hooked into playing "angry man defending against racist attack" or "cold, ruthless, and rational manager concerned only with the bottom line." It's almost as though each of us wears a velcro vest that attracts only a certain type of "stuff" that exists in the group. At the conference, you will probably find yourself behaving in group roles that seem familiar to you even though you have never seen any of the people in your group before. This may cause you to wonder about why it is that certain roles recur in your life almost regardless of the circumstances. And, the follow-up question may also occur to you, "Is this the role that I want to play?"

Transference. As we meet someone who reminds us of another, we often transfer our ideas and feelings about the person we knew to the person we are just getting to know. For example, based on my gender and job title, a female participant in a weekend session told me shortly after meeting me that when she looked at me she saw her father, and, she had a significant number of issues yet to be worked out with her father! As she and I worked on issues related to leadership and authority, some of it was truly between her and me. However, she was aware that a lot of it was between her and her father as represented by me. What an important difference!

I suspect that transference is quite common. What is uncommon is enough self-awareness to recognize that many of the issues that appear to be between you and another person are really between you and someone from your past.

How does a conference increase awareness about these and other unconscious processes?

Imagine yourself driving to the grocery store, a favorite tune playing loudly on the radio, as you pay attention to traffic patterns, obey traffic signals, and listen to your mother-in-law's criticism about your driving. All of a sudden, you think you hear some unusual noise in the engine but you're not quite sure. What do you do? You remove as many of the distracting sights and sounds as you can and listen to the engine.

This is the equivalent to what happens at an A. K. Rice conference. Group process (the engine) continues to run, and many distractions to observing group process are

removed. Unlike groups in business where the primary focus is on content (e.g., solving a problem or producing something *tangible*), groups at an A. K. Rice conference focus on process (i.e., what is going on). At an even more fundamental level, groups also examine what factors (conscious and unconscious) are influencing individuals to behave as they do.

The absence of the distractions is uncomfortable. If you habitually listen to the radio as you drive, see how long you can go before your hand-seemingly on its own-turns on the radio. Groups at a conference are sometimes (actually, almost always) uncomfortable because many of the things we use to avoid discomfort in groups are missing. It's unlikely that you will find name tags, even though few know anyone else at the conference. The typical go-around-the-table-and-introduce-yourself is not a prescribed part of the group experience. A leader for small group sessions is not designated. A specific agenda with specific points to be covered during each break-out period is not provided. The chairs in a room may be arranged in some unusual fashion. Consultants will say things that only occasionally seem to be relevant, and then refuse to interact with you in a way that is familiar and comfortable. By staying with our discomfort and searching for something closer to its true cause, we can learn much about ourselves. As we learn more, we acquire the capacity to change and be more effective.

I though you said this was going to be brief!

Okay, get your hint. I didn't have much more to add anyway. Let me close with this: An experience at an A.K. Rice conference is unlikely to be similar to anything you have experienced before. If you go to a conference with a commitment to learn, it's almost guaranteed that you will learn something significant about a topic you are sure to believe is important-what causes you to *behave* as you do and how you can be more effective.

Sincerely,
Robert E. Bart
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