

Consciousness, Soul, and the Architecture of Human Systems

BART Revisited

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Abstract

This paper proposes TRAB-S as a revision and extension of the familiar BART framework in group relations. It begins with task, then considers the roles through which task is embodied, the authority by which work is undertaken, and the boundaries that contain it. It then names Soul—the lived fact of consciousness and feeling—as the affective ground of all four. Drawing on Freud’s Seelenapparat, Solms’s account of consciousness as feeling, and Panksepp’s primary emotional systems, the essay reframes group and organizational life as networks of consciousness in which task, role, authority, and boundary are always emotionally lived. TRAB-S offers a compact way to make that affective architecture visible.

Keywords: *affect, authority, BART, boundary, consciousness, group relations, role, soul, task, TRAB-S*

From BART to TRAB

In the lexicon of group relations, few acronyms are as familiar as BART: Boundary, Authority, Role, and Task. Green and Molenkamp offered this system as a way to make the dynamics of groups and organizations more accessible. By focusing on those four elements, participants in group relations conferences could observe what was happening in the “here-and-now” of group life without drowning in jargon.

BART has proven its durability. It allows us to see how time and space boundaries hold or collapse; how authority is taken up or abdicated; how roles are occupied formally and informally; how the task is defined, avoided, or resisted. Yet even in its first articulation, BART was acknowledged as a simplification — a framework, not a total theory.

With time, a limitation has become apparent: by placing boundary at the head of the acronym, BART tends to obscure what is in fact the primary driver of group life — the task. No group exists without one. Boundary, authority, and role only make sense in relation to a task.

Thus the proposal: invert BART into TRAB — Task, Role, Authority, Boundary. Start where groups start: with what they are formed to do. From there, move through how people embody the task (role), how legitimacy is structured (authority), and how the work is contained (boundary).

Yet one more step is required. There is an unspoken element underlying all four. Without it, none of the others would even be perceptible. That element is soul.

The Apparatus of the Soul

When Freud wrote of what we call “mind,” his word was *Seelenapparat* — literally, “apparatus of the soul.” From the first translation into English and to this day translators smoothed away the term’s resonance. More succinct than the compound German word, “mind” sounded more respectable and less metaphysical. But something vital was lost.

In common usage, “soul” often carries religious associations — that part of us imagined to endure beyond bodily death. For many, this is a matter of faith. It is not my purpose here to either affirm or debunk spiritual or religious convictions. Without prejudice, as a contested domain destined to evade agreement in this life, I think of this as “the cosmic nonsense that is for each person their cosmic make-sense.” What I mean by soul is something closer to what we can know: the lived fact of consciousness itself.

As Mark Solms has argued, to be a mind is to be conscious. And consciousness is not thought, nor perception, nor intelligence. Consciousness is feeling.

A computer can calculate faster than we can, and cameras can perceive more detail than our eyes. But neither feels. The defining property of mind — the essence of the apparatus of the soul — is subjectivity, the “what it is like” of experience. Consciousness is the felt quality of being alive.

In this sense, soul and consciousness are the same thing. Soul is not an ethereal add-on but the very capacity to feel one’s own existence. It is the ground upon which all else rests.

The Seven Emotional Systems: Affective Foundations

Here Jaak Panksepp’s pioneering work on the brain’s primary emotional systems gives us a concrete map. He identified seven innate affective systems common in mammals including us humans, each with its own neural circuitry:

SEEKING: curiosity, exploration, desire, the restless drive toward the new. SEEKING is the primary, universal system — the through-line connecting all the others.

CARE: nurturance, bonding, attachment.

PLAY: joy, creativity, social reciprocity.

LUST: sexual desire — but also desire more broadly, the energy of wanting and longing.

FEAR: vigilance, avoidance of danger.

RAGE: the feeling of frustration, the protest that arises when something we expect or need is blocked.

PANIC/GRIEF: loss, separation distress, longing for reunion.

Solms built on this to show that these affective systems are the very core of consciousness. To be conscious is to feel these states. Thinking, perceiving, remembering — these are built atop the deeper foundation of affect.

This has profound implications for group life. Every group task is saturated with these systems. A new initiative activates SEEKING. The presence of caregiving roles activates CARE. Threats to survival stir FEAR and RAGE. The loss of members brings PANIC/GRIEF. Without acknowledging these affective undercurrents, our analyses of boundary, authority, role, and task remain superficial.

Task: Always Already Emotional

To say that task is primary is to say more than “every group has a job to do.” It is to recognize that every task touches feeling. A task undertaken with curiosity engages SEEKING. A caregiving task rests upon CARE. A task done under deadline may activate FEAR.

In group relations language, tasks are divided into primary, survival, and process tasks. But all are lived through affect. The primary task (what the group is meant to do) constantly collides with the survival task (the group’s need to preserve itself). Off-task behavior — fight, flight, dependency, pairing, oneness — is the expression of affective systems taking over when anxiety rises.

To understand task, then, is not only to define it but to sense what it feels like. Groups succeed or fail less on the clarity of the words on paper than on how well the feelings evoked by the task are contained and transformed.

Role: Embodiment of Affective Valence

Roles are how groups distribute tasks. Some roles are assigned formally; others are taken informally. But underneath both is what group relations theorists call valence — our unconscious tendency to gravitate toward certain roles.

Valence is, at bottom, affective. Those who are prone to CARE often become nurturers. Those haunted by FEAR may take on risk-averse or watchful roles. Those who embody RAGE may become challengers. Those enlivened by PLAY may become innovators.

This does not mean our roles are determined by biology alone. Personal histories shape how each system is expressed. But the point is that roles are not abstract or purely cognitive. They are affect made social, consciousness distributed into the fabric of a group.

Authority: Authorship of the Collective Affects

Authority is classically “the right to do work on behalf of the group.” But the etymology is revealing: author — “one who causes to grow.”

Authority channels affect. Leaders absorb the fear of the group, contain its rage, authorize its play, channel its care. Sometimes they fail, and their failure is not just organizational but emotional: panic spreads, rage turns destructive, grief becomes immobilizing.

Seen through Solms, authority is not merely hierarchical. It is affective authorship. Those in authority do not only make decisions; they become vessels through which collective feelings are legitimized and directed.

Boundary: Containment of Feeling

Boundaries are often described in cognitive or structural terms: time, task, territory. But their true function is affective containment.

A well-held boundary soothes fear (“we know when this ends”), channels rage (“we know whose turn it is”), and permits play (“we know this is a safe space”). A porous or collapsing boundary lets unconscious feelings spill unchecked. Too rigid a boundary deadens the group, squeezing out play and care.

Beyond BART expanded this notion by introducing kairos — the felt experience of the opportune moment — alongside chronos, linear time. Here again, affect is central: kairos is what it feels like when time bends and consciousness deepens.

Soul/Consciousness: The Ground of It All

All of this rests upon soul — which, following Solms, we may now name consciousness. To be a soul is to feel. To be a mind is to be aware of feeling.

Groups, then, are not merely collections of roles, authorities, and boundaries working on tasks. They are networks of consciousness. Each member brings a unique history that colors how the primary emotional systems are activated. Yet the systems themselves are universal, shared across the species.

This is the paradox: consciousness is both utterly individual (“my” feeling) and utterly collective (the same systems in all of us). Soul is what makes my grief mine and your grief yours, yet also what makes both recognizable as grief.

When we speak of TRAB-S, then, we are speaking of systems animated by consciousness. Task is defined and experienced in feeling. Role is the embodiment of affective valence. Authority is the authorship of collective emotions. Boundary is the container for shared anxiety and play. Soul — consciousness — is the condition of possibility for them all.

Why TRAB-S Matters

BART simplified group life into four accessible elements. TRAB-S restores its depth.

By beginning with task, we acknowledge that groups form for work, not for the sake of boundaries alone. By attending to role, we see how tasks are embodied. By analyzing authority, we see how legitimacy is conferred. By watching boundaries, we see how the work is held. And by naming soul/consciousness, we remind ourselves that all of this is lived in feeling.

To be a mind is to be a soul. To be a group is to be a community of souls. Our challenge — in organizations, in families, in societies — is to learn how to hold, channel, and contain the currents of consciousness that animate us. TRAB-S is one way to make that work visible.

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