SYSTEMS PSYCHODYNAMICS:
The Formative Years of an Interdisciplinary Field at the Tavistock Institute

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Systems psychodynamics is an interdisciplinary field amalgamating a triad of influences—the practice of psychoanalysis, the theories and methods of the field of group relations, and the task and boundary awareness of open systems perspectives. Although systems psychodynamics is not a new field of study, there has been a general lack of awareness of its roots, how its formative elements have become intertwined over the years, and the role of the Tavistock Institute in developments in the field. This article provides a synthesis of this history and focuses, in particular, on the intellectual foundations of the Tavistock method of working experientially with groups and the application of this method to the study of organizations.

Systems psychodynamics is an interdisciplinary field that integrates three disciplines—the practice of psychoanalysis, the theories and methods of group relations, and open systems perspectives. *Systems psychodynamics* is "a term used to refer to the collective psychological behavior" (Neumann, 1999, p. 57) within and between groups and organizations. "Systems psychodynamics, therefore, provides a way of thinking about energizing or motivating forces resulting from the interconnection between various groups and sub-units of a social system" (Neumann, 1999, p. 57).

Although systems psychodynamics is not a new field of study, there has been a general lack of awareness of its roots, how its formative elements have become intertwined over the years, and the role of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Tavistock Institute) in developments in the field. This article provides a synthesis of this history and focuses, in particular, on the intellectual foundations of the Tavistock method of working experientially with groups and the application of this method to the study of organizations. It will discuss the formative years of systems psychodynamics from the late 1800s, with developments in psychoanalysis and theories about groups, until Miller and Rice (1967) outlined their approach to studying organizations by integrating group relations practice with psychoanalytic and open systems theories. Throughout the essay,

the impact of the social, political, and cultural influences of the time will be investigated.

Although Gould, Stapley, and Stein (2001) observed that "the field of *systems psychodynamics* had its birth with the publication of Miller and Rice's seminal volume *Systems of Organization* (1967)" (p. 1), Miller and Rice never explicitly used the term in their book. According to Laurence Gould, Eric J. Miller, who was then director of the Tavistock Institute's Group Relations Programme, coined the term *systems psychodynamics* when discussing their work informally in the late 1980s and the concept just "caught on" (L. Gould, personal communication, May 8, 2003).

Mannie Sher, current director of the Tavistock Institute's Group Relations Programme, recalled, "When I took up my post at the Tavistock Institute in October 1997, the term 'system psycho-dynamics' was in vogue at the Institute and used widely by Eric [Miller], Richard Holti, and Jean Neumann" (M. Sher, personal communication, May 12, 2003). Yet, further research reveals that it was not until *Systems Psychodynamics in the Service of Political Organizational Change* (Neumann, 1999) was released that any author explicitly discussed the concept in a scholarly publication.

Jean E. Neumann, core faculty of the Tavistock Institute's Advanced Organisational Consultation (AOC) Programme, reflected on the process by which the term *systems psychodynamics* came into use:

> Both Eric and I wanted to discourage consultants from thinking that the role taken by a consultant at a group relations event was the only, or even preferred, role to take in working with organisations. I wanted to emphasize the idea that what an organisational consultant needed to do was apply psychodynamics to the diagnosis of, and intervention into, issues relevant to any particular organisational change and development project. A range of roles, theories and approaches could be used for the application of psychodynamic theory to organisations and other systems (e.g. between groups and organisations, within communities). Psychodynamics, instead of psychoanalysis, was important because AOC faculty considered other depth psychologies relevant as well. (J. Neumann, personal correspondence, June 4, 2002)

The first mention of the term *system psychodynamics* in print form was in 1993 in the Tavistock Institute's *1992/93 Review*. The Institute's annual report provided a candid overview of the work of the Tavistock Institute, including the activities, developments, interests, and concerns of Institute staff over the year. Having observed that the Group Relations Programme emerged in the 1960s based on "the Institute's innovative work in bringing together open systems and psychodynamic perspectives to the study of group and organisational processes," Miller noted nonetheless that "the Tavistock Institute's own activities in this field have not been expanding" (*1992/93 Review,* 1993, p. 42). He concluded that it was necessary to "redevelop this heartland area of the Institute" (*1992/93 Review,* 1993, p. 42) and recommended a new strategy, termed *system psychodynamics,* with which to accomplish this. System psychodynamics was as much an organizational strategy as it was an integration of theoretical approaches.[1] Miller noted

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[1] Thank you to one of the *History of Psychology*'s anonymous readers for this observation.

that "the two main thrusts of the emergent strategy are to enlarge the nucleus of staff competent to work with the 'system psychodynamics' perspective and to take roles in the educational activities of the Programme and, during 1993–94, to extend the range of these activities to include events specifically designed for industrial, commercial and other sectors and not confined to the experiential method" (*1992/93 Review,* 1993, p. 42).

In response to this observation, three external Programme Advisers were appointed in early 1992—Wesley Carr, Tim Dartington, and Olya Khaleelee—and, along with former Tavistock staff member Isabel Menzies Lyth and current staff member Jean Neumann, they undertook these tasks. So the term *system psychodynamics,* which later transformed into *systems psychodynamics,* came into existence.

Psychoanalytic Roots

The first element of the systems psychodynamics triad of influences—the practice of psychoanalysis—emerged in the late 1800s. This Victorian era, characterized by a conservative social climate, was accompanied by rapid advances in science, medicine, and technological knowledge. One example of advances in thinking during this time that laid the foundation for the field of systems psychodynamics was Sigmund Freud's theories of psychoanalysis.

Although Freud is not known as a group theorist per se,[2] his psychoanalytic theories about individuals and his influence over the work of Melanie Klein can be credited with laying the theoretical foundation of systems psychodynamics. In particular, Klein's (1986) object relations theory, which both built upon and departed from the work of Freud, proved essential. Although Klein's work predominantly focused on children, her theories about splitting, projective identification, and the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions were later applied to adults and groups by her analysand, Wilfred Bion. In the post-World War II period, Bion's observations about group behavior led to the development of the field of group relations, the second element of the systems psychodynamics triad, which will be explored later in this essay.

In addition to Freud and Klein's influences from the field of psychology, the emerging field of sociology also contributed insights that led to the development of theories about people's behaviors in groups. In 1896, French sociologist Gustave Le Bon published his now renowned observations about large, unorganized groups in his book *The Crowd*. Le Bon theorized that a person sacrifices a part of his or her individuality when joining a group, especially a large group, and becomes more easily influenced and susceptible to suggestion. Perhaps one of the first theorists to examine the group as a whole, Le Bon observed that the group mind was illogical, intolerant, prejudiced, rigid, uninhibited, and submissive to any dominant force that exerted its authority. According to Le Bon (1896), "An individual in a crowd is a grain of sand amid other grains of sand, which the wind stirs up at will" (p. 33). Le Bon described how a charismatic leader could sway

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[2] Freud did, however, publish several books that touched on group, organizational, and social issues. Notably, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1922), *Totem and Taboo* (1913), and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1946).

a crowd by playing on the crowd's childlike credulity and untethered emotions in a manner which Freud (1922) observed "as being actually hypnotic" (p. 8).

Although Le Bon's work has been cited frequently within the psychoanalytic tradition, not everyone agreed with his theories about group behavior at the time. Even Freud (1922) spent 15 of the 75 pages of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* quoting and paraphrasing the work of Le Bon, only to dismiss his contributions. Freud contended, "None of that author's statements bring forward anything new. Everything that he says to the detriment and depreciation of the manifestations of the group mind had already been said by others before him" (p. 14). In fact, Freud (1922) interpreted Le Bon's appraisal of the group mind as a reflection of Le Bon's contempt for the masses and fear of social upheaval. Harrison (2000) agreed, observing that Le Bon's "frightening picture of mob activity reflected the bourgeois view of the upheavals occurring in France throughout the nineteenth century" (p. 28).

Despite these criticisms, in 1920 British social theorist William McDougall expanded upon Le Bon's work and developed important insights about organized groups as a whole. Like Le Bon, McDougall (1920) believed that unorganized groups were emotional, impulsive, violent, and suggestible and, at times, acted almost like a wild beast. McDougall added, however, that a mental shift occurs along with a marked change in group behavior when a group is organized and task-oriented. This shift causes an intensification of emotion in each individual group member that is seldom attained under any other conditions and can be harnessed effectively for positive group achievement (McDougall, 1920).

Group Relations

World War I and Its Impact on Psychological Studies of Group Behavior

At the same time that many theorists were trying to gain a deeper understanding of group behavior, European disharmony grew to the point of war in 1914. The war became a laboratory of sorts for the psychological study of group behavior. For example, military leaders in Europe started to identify nervous disorders or psychological ailments among their troops. They used the term *shell-shock* to describe these ailments regardless of symptoms. Prior to this, any instability exhibited by a soldier was classified as cowardice or malingering, which was often punishable by death. Later research revealed that "amongst the records of those men shot for cowardice there is clear evidence to suggest that a number were suffering from mental health problems" (Harrison, 2000, p. 79). When World War I ended in 1918, the horrors it had caused fostered revulsion for war and a hope that future conflicts could be avoided through a clearer understanding of human behavior and diplomacy.

As a result of psychological lessons learned during World War I, the Tavistock Clinic was founded in London in 1920. Originally known as the Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology, the clinic was established as "one of the first out-patient clinics in Great Britain to provide systematic major psychotherapy on the basis of concepts inspired by psychoanalytic theory" (Dicks, 1970, p. 1) for patients unable to afford private fees. In addition, it "subsequently became an important centre for training for psychiatrists and allied professionals"

(Miller, 1989, p. 3). The clinic was founded based on the vision and energy of its director, Dr. Hugh Crichton-Miller, who conceived of it as a model clinic for other psychiatric departments[3] (Dicks, 1970).

In September 1920, the original Tavistock Clinic staff consisted of nine doctors: Dr. Hugh Crichton-Miller (Honorary Director), Dr. J .R. Rees (Deputy Director in 1926), Dr. Mary Hemingway, Dr. J. A. Hadfield, Dr. E. A. Hamilton Pearson, Dr. Leslie Tucker, Dr. Neill Hobhouse, Dr. W. A. Potts, and Dr. Evelyn Saywell (Dicks, 1970, p. 14). This key group of doctors joined professionals from a variety of backgrounds, including anthropology, psychology, psychiatry, neurologists, and physicians, to found the clinic. From the beginning, an eclectic group was formed that showed a desire to link the social sciences with general medicine and psychiatry and fostered a tolerance of different professional viewpoints, a characteristic that has remained a common element in the clinic's work (Trist & Murray, 1990).

In addition to the work being conducted at the Tavistock Clinic in the post-World War I period, theorists and practitioners in other parts of the world were continuing to develop new ideas about groups and organizations. Many of these contributions were influential, albeit indirectly, to the development of the second element of the systems psychodynamics triad—the theories and methods of group relations.

Hayden and Molenkamp (2003) defined group relations as the study of "the dynamics of the group as a holistic system" (p. 3). This field of study embraces psychodynamic principles but, contrary to traditional psychoanalysis, applies such theories to the study of the group as a social system. Three contributions proved to be pivotal in the history of group relations. First, without identifying it as such, Le Bon and McDougall provided key observations about group behavior by introducing the idea of studying the group as a whole. Group as a whole refers to the behavior of a "group as a social system and the individuals' relatedness to that system" (Wells, 1985, p. 112). This shift from the psychoanalytic focus on the individual to an examination of the group as a singular entity represents an important piece of the history of group relations and therefore of systems psychodynamics.

A second contribution to the history of group relations was made by Bion and others when, after World War II, they experimented by shifting from the clinician's gaze outside the phenomenon to an "outsider within" perspective. Abandoning traditional psychoanalytic perspectives and embracing the perspective of the group as a whole, Bion used himself as an instrument to detect group behavior and thereby developed a new method of working with groups.

A third important contribution to the history of group relations was provided by Kurt Lewin in an almost accidental discovery. During a 1946 workshop, Lewin and his colleagues experimented with his hypothesis that adults learn more effectively through interactive experiences shared in experiential learning environments rather than through traditional lectures and seminars. The results of this

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[3] Crichton-Miller's hopes in this regard were dashed as other clinics were slow to become established and the ones that were available were slow and halting in their development (Dicks, 1970).

first experiential learning event led to development of the human laboratory and influenced the subsequent development of the group relations conference.

These three historical contributions—the group-as-a-whole perspective, the practice of using one's self as an instrument, and the methods gleaned from experiential learning—laid the early foundation for the field of group relations. It is important to note, however, that several other theorists made contributions to the application of psychology to the study of group behavior and organizations.

One of the first theorists to apply psychology to the workplace, Mary Parker Follett (1941), described the advantages of a more cooperative work environment in her essay "The Giving of Orders."[4] Arguing for a less hierarchical worker–management interface, Follett offered that the solution to workers' resistance to following orders was to "depersonalize the giving of orders" (p. 58). She suggested that workers and foremen should study a situation together and allow a solution to which both parties would be responsive to emerge naturally. "With scientific management the managers are as much under orders as the workers, for both obey the law of the situation" (p. 59).

Between 1927 and 1932, Elton Mayo conducted a now famous study at the Hawthorne Works of the Western Electric Company in Chicago. By studying women assembling telephone relays, Mayo (1933) explored the relationship between the worker and the work environment and the link between human motivation and productivity. "The Hawthorne experiments showed that complex, interactional variables make the difference in motivating people—things like attention paid to workers as individuals, workers' control over their own work, differences between individuals' needs, management's willingness to listen, group norms, and direct feedback" (Shafritz & Ott, 1996, pp. 150–151).

Although the contributions of Follett (1941) and Mayo (1933) may seem like obscure links to systems psychodynamics, they represent clear examples of the ways in which theorists began to shift their thinking about organizations and work between the wars. Paving the way for new methods such as systems psychodynamics, these theorists recognized organizations as complex interactive systems, a unique perspective at the time, and highlighted the importance of "the human aspect of industry" (Mayo, 1933, p. 1).

As previously mentioned, another influential social scientist in the post-World War I period was Kurt Lewin. Living in Germany during World War I, Lewin had observed first hand the potential that humanity had for both good and evil and firmly believed that the social sciences could and must be used to maximize human good. His harrowing wartime experiences resulted in a life-long commitment to the use of science to integrate democratic values in society. After fleeing Nazi Germany for the United States in 1932, Lewin taught at Stanford and then Cornell before establishing permanent residency and accepting a teaching position in child psychology at Iowa State University (Hirsch, 1987).

One of Lewin's many contributions to the development of systems psychodynamics was the notion of psychosociological influences over group behaviors. His methods were grounded in the philosophy that "the group to which an individual belongs is the ground for his perceptions, his feelings, and his actions" (Lewin,

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[4] First presented in 1925 before a Bureau of Personnel Administration conference.

1948, p. vii). By providing the elusive conceptual framework to examine group behavior, Lewin's theories, which were known as *applied psychology* or *field theory,* provided a way in which the tension between the individual and group could be studied.

Field theory, originally used in physics, was made popular in the study of social fields by Lewin, among others, in the 1940s because of its focus on the characteristics of interdependence. By applying scientific reasoning, Lewin compared groups to a molecule's parts and their interrelatedness and thereby demystified the nature of group life. He (1947) wrote:

> There is no more magic behind the fact that groups have properties of their own, which are different from the properties of their subgroups or their individual members, than behind the fact that molecules have properties, which are different from properties of the atoms or ions of which they are composed. (p. 8)

In addition, Lewin (1947) cautioned researchers that "only by considering the groups in question in their actual setting, can we be sure that none of the essential conduct has been overlooked" (p. 14).

Lewin's philosophies exerted significant influence over members of the Tavistock Institute. Miller (1993) noted that "the Tavistock group shared his conviction that conventional modes of scientific analysis would not uncover the 'Gestalt' properties of complex human systems" (p. 5). Therefore, new methods were required.

In another contribution, Lewin (1948) introduced the concept of *degrees of freedom* and explored the sharpness of boundaries in a way that seems to foreshadow Rice's (1965) discussion of boundaries in open systems—the third element of the systems psychodynamics triad—in his book *Learning for Leadership.* Miller (1993) confirmed the importance of Lewin's contributions, noting that Lewin's "way of looking at groups and institutions as 'dynamic wholes'" had considerable influence on "my early Tavistock colleagues" (p. 5).

As evidenced by the three examples discussed previously, theorists such as Follett, Mayo, and Lewin were struggling in the post-World War I period to better understand people's behaviors in groups and organizations and to explore the implications of this new knowledge for the development of a democratic society and a productive workplace. Although none of these theorists can be considered a systems psychodynamics expert, per se, each holds a piece of the historical puzzle that led to developments of the field of systems psychodynamics. The inciting incident that results in the merging of these different perspectives is once again war.

Northfield Experiments of World War II

World War I revealed the necessity of developing ways to treat shell-shocked soldiers; World War II required that therapists move beyond an individual treatment model to address the large number of soldiers who required treatment. Yet "at the outbreak of war in 1939 there was extremely limited mental health expertise in the British Army" (Harrison, 2000, p. 83). As a start to rectifying this problem, two senior psychiatrists were appointed as consulting psychiatrists to the

British army: Henry Yellowlees, a veteran from World War I, and J. R. Rees, the former director of the Tavistock Clinic.

The appointment of Rees proved pivotal. After Rees's appointment, many Tavistock Clinic employees joined the war effort. Two members joined the Royal Navy, 31 joined the army, and 3 staff members joined the Royal Air Force. Dicks (1970) recalled, "The ranks held in the Services by members of the Tavistock staff included two brigadiers (J. R. Rees and E. A. Bennet), twelve Surgeon Commanders, Lieut.-Colonels or Wing Commanders, and nineteen Majors or squadron leaders" (p. 118). As a result of these recruiting efforts, "by July 1943 there were 197 serving psychiatrists, and by 1945 there were over 300" (Harrison, 2000, p. 84).

The presence of the former Tavistock Clinic employees in the British army remained formidable throughout the war. Colloquially referred to as the *Tavistock group* or the *invisible college,* this group included Wilfred Bion and John Rickman, as well as Harold Bridger, Tom Main, Eric Trist, Tommy Wilson, John Bowlby, Ron Hargreaves, and John Sutherland. Although these men were not all clinicians, they were all interested in psychoanalysis and shared many of the same philosophies about working with groups. They kept in close communication during the war.

In a twist of fate, Bion's prior military experience, education, and athleticism brought him to a juncture in the 1940s that made it seem as if he was somehow destined to become "the father of group relations" (Fraher, 2002, p. 14). Bion served with distinction in World War I as part of the Tank Corps, eventually qualifying as a tank officer in France later in the war. After World War I, Bion read history at Queen's College in Oxford. He was active in athletics and excelled in swimming, water polo, and rugby. After Oxford, he took a position as a schoolmaster for 2 years. Bion's daughter Francesca (F. Bion, 1982) writes that "by 1924 it was clear to him where his interest lay—in psychoanalysis" (p. 6). Bion completed medical training at University College Hospital in London and joined the staff at the Tavistock Clinic before World War II. Bion's combination of front-line battle experience from World War I and psychoanalytic training proved to be an invaluable combination for British army psychiatry.

Manpower shortages during the war severely hampered British military success. It was during this desperate time to get rehabilitated soldiers back to the battlefield that much of Bion and his colleague's experimentation with groups took place at a treatment facility called the Northfield Hospital. Trist (1985) recalled the following:

> Northfield was a large military psychiatric hospital which functioned as a clearing house. According to a man's condition, he would be discharged from the army, return to his unit or found alternative military employment. The need for manpower was at its height. Any method was welcome which would encourage a body of disaffected men displaying a bewildering variety of symptoms in different degrees of acuteness, to re-engage with the role of being a soldier in an army at war. Methods so far tried had yielded poor results. (p. 14)

In response to this need, Bion devised a therapeutic community, outlined in a document called the "Wharncliffe Memorandum" in 1939. The premise of the therapeutic community was to use the entire hospital environment as a therapeu-

tically engaged social system to treat patients by shifting the focus from individual treatment to that of group process, leadership concepts, and social obligation. Paramount was the notion that the group analyzes its own dynamics rather than waiting for outside direction from authority figures. This philosophy becomes a central tenant in the field of group relations and therefore in systems psychodynamics.

Events that transpired at the Northfield Hospital had widespread impact on the field of psychiatry both during and after the war. Many of the invisible college returned to their former employer, the Tavistock Clinic. Much of the clinic's post-war work was based on the experimentation that this interdisciplinary group from the invisible college conducted at the Northfield Hospital during the war years. In particular, experimentation with experiential group methods and the development of a therapeutic community laid the foundation for the emergence after the war of a new field called *group relations*—the second element of the systems psychodynamics triad.

Like many organizations after the war, the Tavistock Clinic was challenged to pick up the pieces that remained of the once thriving organization and rebuild. In 1945, an interim planning committee was established to consider the future of the Tavistock Clinic and to redefine the clinic's mission in light of experiences gained during the war. This committee was chaired by Bion who, modeling his new findings about groups, helped to clarify issues and reduce conflicts within the committee itself, which facilitated the committee's approval of his report by year's end. This report diagrammed the clinic's tasks as: (a) exploration of the role of outpatient psychiatry based on a dynamic approach and oriented toward the social sciences in the as yet undefined settings of the new National Health Service and (b) incorporation of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations (Tavistock Institute) for the study of wider social problems not currently seen as being within the purview of the mental health profession (Trist & Murray, 1990). As a result, the Tavistock Institute was founded in 1946.

Post-World War II and the Development of Group Relations

The post-World War II period could be classified as the birth of the field of group relations, because many people excitedly experimented with the knowledge gained from their wartime experiences. Central to this exploration were Bion and his fellow members of the Tavistock Clinic, then Tavistock Institute, in England and Lewin and the National Training Laboratory (NTL) in the United States. The NTL's contributions were pivotal with the development of its human laboratory, an experiential method of studying groups in 1947.

In London, Bion continued to make significant contributions to social psychiatry. In 1948, he was asked *to take* therapeutic groups, a colloquialism for using the group techniques he had honed through his experiences in World War II. While working with this small group of patients in the adult department of the Tavistock Clinic, Bion decided to provide the group with no direction and no structure to assess the group's reaction. Rosenbaum and Snadowsky (1976) observed that the reason for this abrupt break from traditional methods was twofold: "First, he wasn't sure what he was doing so he decided to remain silent. Second, he is a rather withdrawn individual" (p. 27). As a result of Bion's silence,

the patients were puzzled, upset, and angry and responded in a variety of ways. Bion's unique contribution was that he interpreted these reactions as the group's dynamic as a whole not as the behavior of individual group members.

What may have started as a response to uncertainty and/or a reflection of Bion's personality was transformed eventually into a therapeutic technique central to group relations and the Tavistock tradition. Trist (1985) wrote the following observation of Bion's methods for taking groups: "Several features characterized Bion's group 'style'. He was detached yet warm, utterly imperturbable and inexhaustibly patient. He gave rise to feelings of immense security—his Rock of Gibraltar quality. But the Rock of Gibraltar is also powerful and he exuded power (he was also a very large man)" (p. 30).

In Kleinian terms, Bion seemed to be inviting, whether consciously or not, the group's projective identification with him. That is, he made himself available for the group to disown their uncomfortable feelings and project them onto him as a means to understand the group's unconscious behavior (Gabriel, 1999). As Trist (1985) put it, "He made it safe for the group to dramatize its unconscious situation" (p. 31).

Bion's methods were heavily influenced by the theories of Melanie Klein, especially her ideas about basic defense mechanisms, such as splitting and projective identification. These theories proved to be the link Bion needed to join theories that described the individual's unconscious experience with those he was developing to represent experiences of group membership. Bion extended Klein's theories by exploring how group membership often evoked some of the same contradictory feelings as those experienced during childhood in response to the mother. Through Bion's lens, Klein's object relations theory explained how experiences in groups trigger "primitive phantasies [sic] whose origins lie in the earliest years of life" (Gabriel, 1999, p. 118). For example, one unconscious desire is for the individual to join with others in an undifferentiated entity, like the infant fusing with the breast. Although comforting, this desire also creates resultant fears, such as the fear of becoming overwhelmed or consumed by the undifferentiated mass of the group or the fear of being rejected or abandoned by the group.

In his articles, Bion outlined his theories of group behavior that were based largely on observations he made while working with small groups over the years. He hypothesized that groups have two modes of operation. One mode he called the productive *sophisticated group,* more commonly called a *work group*. The work group focused intently on the group's task and maintains close contact with reality. The other mode of group operation Bion called *basic assumption*. Its primary task was to ease the group's anxieties and avoid the pain or emotions that further work might bring. As an example, Bion identified three types of basic assumption modes: basic assumption of *dependence* (baD), basic assumption of *pairing* (baP), and basic assumption of *fight-flight* (baF) (W. R. Bion, 1961). When a group operates in the basic assumption mode of dependency, Bion noted:

> One person is always felt to be in a position to supply the needs of the group, and the rest in a position to which their needs are supplied. . .having thrown all their cares on the leader, they sit back and wait for him to solve all their problems. . .the dependent group soon shows that an integral part of its structure is a belief in the omniscience and omnipotence of some one member of the group. (pp. 74, 82, 99)

The group assumes this leader, whether selected formally or informally, has clairvoyance of thought and supernatural powers and that the rest of the group is powerless and dependent. When the leader fails to meet the group's unrealistic expectations, as he or she inevitably does, the group becomes quickly frustrated and disappointedly selects another member for the daunting task. This leader will also fail eventually, of course (W. R. Bion, 1961; Gabriel, 1999).

The basic assumption mode of pairing is evident in a group when the group invests irrational hopefulness for the future in two of the group members. Regardless of gender, the group assumes that these two individuals have paired either for a "sexual" experience, which would provide the birth of a new group, a religious experience, which would provide a messiah, or a reparative experience, which would produce world peace.

When a group operates in the basic assumption mode of fight-flight, Bion (W. R. Bion, 1961) wrote:

> The group seems to know only two techniques of self-preservation, fight or flight. . .the kind of leadership that is recognized as appropriate is the leadership of the man who mobilizes the group to attack somebody, or alternatively to lead it in flight. . .leaders who neither fight nor run away are not easily understood. (pp. 63, 65)

In 1961, Bion published his influential book, *Experiences in Groups,* which was a compilation of his series of articles printed separately over the years in different journals such as the Tavistock Institute's journal, "Human Relations." Since then, his ideas about groups have had a widespread impact in many different fields from social psychology and sociology to organizational development and leadership studies. Pines (1985) observed:

> *Experiences in Groups* is probably the shortest and most influential text in psychoanalytic group psychotherapy. Whether you agree or disagree with Bion, ignore him you cannot for he looms up at you from the darkness of the deepest areas of human experience, illuminating it with his "beams of darkness." (p. xi)

Similarly, Miller (1998) observed, "Bion's theory has generated a voluminous literature, mainly in the field of psychoanalysis, group psychotherapy, and group dynamics" (p. 1498).

Bion's theories continued to be interpreted and evolved by other theoreticians who applied his theories to working with groups. Rice, Miller, Bridger, Trist, Menzies, and other social scientists affiliated with the Tavistock Institute carried Bion's theories about covert group dynamics, such as unconscious defense mechanisms, into their continued exploration of how best to understand organizations.

The first civilian training group, as opposed to those for military members during and after the war, was held in 1945 under the direction of Bion, Rickman, and Sutherland at the Tavistock Clinic. It consisted of 12 members, one of whom was A. Kenneth Rice. Although it only lasted six sessions, it seemed to have a profound influence over many group members—especially Rice. Rice was so taken by these new methods that he volunteered to become a member of the training group at the Tavistock Institute, again under the direction of Bion. This training group met weekly as a small study group for a period of 2 years between 1947 and 1948.

Rice, an anthropologist by training, had been a businessman and consultant to organizations around the world, most notably to textile industries in India. One of Rice's (1958) most famous projects was with the Ahmedabad Manufacturing and Calico Printing Company, Ltd., in India from 1953 to 1956 detailed in his book *Productivity and Social Organization the Ahmedabad Experiment.* Prior to his experiences in India, Rice had been an officer "in colonial Africa where his liberal convictions and lack of sympathy with racial prejudice made him unpopular with the British colonial administration at the time" (Rioch, 1996, p. 11).

This combination of life experiences would prove pivotal in 1962 when Rice was authorized by the Tavistock Institute to take over the leadership of their new experiential learning events called group relations conferences. First started in 1957, these events were held at the University of Leicester and became known as *The Leicester Conference*. Miller (1989) recalled the circumstances of Rice's appointment, "The reasons were largely pragmatic: the conferences had been losing more money than the Institute could afford, and Rice was willing to try to make them financially viable" (p. 5).

Although Bion provided the foundational theories for the group relations conference, he never attended a Tavistock Institute conference. It was Rice, along with a cadre of others, who developed the design of the group relations conference by further expanding the application of group relations theories and practices. Sher, current Director of the Tavistock Institute, reported:

> Rice would have been talking to people like Trist, Mary [Barker], Turquet, Gosling, and Eric Miller of course, and others. It started off the idea of a laboratory. And that no doubt A. K. Rice's clients would come to this laboratory, and Miller's clients, and Turquet's clients, would come to this laboratory. And learn about things and take the stuff back into their organizations and, at times, take the consultants back with them into the organizations. So there would be a fruitful link between the Leicester Conference, or whatever it was called then, and the ongoing consultation that Rice and others were having with their client organizations. (Fraher, 2002, p. 74)

This new way of thinking, learning, and then applying this knowledge back into organizations quickly became known as the *Tavistock method*. This model used group relations conferences as a way to relieve clients of the organizational distractions of their business world by bringing them into a temporary institution that would provide an experiential learning environment. This environment would provide a common language and experience with which to build upon when the clients and consultants returned to the client's organization. It is not too difficult to see the vestiges of Bion's therapeutic community, as well as the influence of Lewin and the NTL's human laboratory, in the design of this experiential learning community.

After a brief evolutionary period between 1957 and the early 1960s, the design of the Leicester Conference began to stabilize and the format became more predictable. Miller (1989) recalled:

> The essentials of the approach, including its theoretical underpinnings, were largely established by the mid-1960s. Since then, the "Leicester Model" has provided the basis for numerous other conferences, some run by the [Tavistock Institute] and very many more by other institutions, in Britain and a dozen different

countries around the world. In most cases these were developed with the active support of the Tavistock Institute. (p. 1)

Although the structure of the conference has remained largely unchanged, the experience of a group relations conference is never the same. The dynamics among member and staff groups vary; consequently, no two conference experiences are ever alike. Certain conference events have become hallmarks of the Leicester Conference design. Fraher (2002) noted some of these hallmarks, gleaned from a review of 32 Leicester Conference brochures[5]:

1. Every conference member is assigned to a small study group, which is made up of approximately 9 to 12 individuals from all walks of life. The task of this small group is to study its own behavior as it unfolds, in the here and now. A consultant is assigned to assist the group at its task by helping the group examine its own behavior.

2. All working conference members attend the large study group that usually consists of the entire conference membership sitting in a spiral seating arrangement. Not part of the original conference design, the large study group was added to the conference structure in the late 1960s based largely on the work of Turquet (E. J. Miller, personal communication, October 29, 2001). The task of the large study group is to study behaviors that might occur in a crowd or in meetings that consist of more people than can easily form face-to-face interpersonal relationships. It is not uncommon for subgroups to form or split, anti-groups to emerge, and fantasies or myths to be played out. Three to four consultants are normally assigned to assist the group at its task of examining its behavior.

3. An intergroup event, not included in the first conference design, was successfully added in 1959 largely through the work of Harold Bridger. During the intergroup event, members are free to form their own subgroups within the predetermined conference groups to study behaviors within and between groups in any manner they choose. In addition, most conferences also include an institutional event that enables the study of the relationships and relatedness between all subgroups of the conference as an institution.[6] Consultants are available upon request during both events.

4. Near the end of the conference, all members are assigned to review and application groups that are made up of 5 to 10 people from similar or complementary backgrounds. The goal of the application group is for members to reflect on their conference experience to consider how their

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[5] 1963 to 2002, excluding 1977 and 1986 to 1989.
[6] For example, the "A" subconference, the "B" subconference, and the training group might have separate intergroup events but might all participate in a joint institutional event.

learning can be applied to similar roles outside. A consultant is assigned to assist individuals in their interpretations and application of their new knowledge.

After having experienced the events of a conference, it is up to the individual to decide which conference experiences and learning are valuable. Therefore, Miller (1993) observed:

> What he learns, therefore, is unique to him. He cannot be told what he "ought to have learned": indeed, that phrase itself is an expression of dependence on authority. Other people, including the consultant, may offer their views of a situation, but only the individual member is in a position to understand, in light of the role he has, the relationship between what is happening around him and what is happening inside him; hence it is on his own authority that he accepts what is valid for him and rejects what is not. (p. 22)

At approximately the same time that the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the group relations conference were emerging in the post-war period, the work of von Bertalanffy (1950) came to the attention of social scientists at the Tavistock Institute. Trist and Murray (1993) reported:

> While on sabbatical at the Institute from Australia in 1951, Emery alerted his colleagues to the significance for social science of von Bertalanffy's (1950) notion of open systems. This provided a new way of considering individuals, groups and organizations in relation to their environments. (p. 30)

The amalgamation of open systems thinking with the Institute's previously popular sociopsychological perspective resulted in the creation of a new paradigm: the sociotechnical perspective. This perspective set the stage for the emergence of systems psychodynamics approximately 30 years later.

Systems Theory

The third and final element in the systems psychodynamics triad is the task and boundary awareness from open systems theory. Systems thinking was, of course, not novel even in the late 19th century. In fact, Churchman (1968) claimed that systemic thinking can be traced back at least as far as Plato's *Republic* in 400 B.C. He added, "the 'pre-Socratics' are even fresher than Plato and Aristotle, and are mainly interested in the 'whole system'. . .The nineteenth century produced many writers on the nature of whole systems: Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Spengler, Spencer, to mention a few" (Churchman, 1968, p. 240). These early theorists' contributions about whole systems laid an intellectual foundation that ignited general inquiry into the nature of social systems.

Work being done at the Tavistock Clinic prior to World War II and then at the Tavistock Institute in the post-war period explored the question of whole systems. In a manner similar to the ways in which successes in group psychology during the wars led to developments in the field of group relations, the successes of scientific teams in the military in World War II led to expanded system thinking. Churchman (1968) noted, "As a consequence after the war there was a rush to apply the same kind of thinking, which then was called 'operations research,' to

various nonmilitary problems, and in particular to industry" (p. ix). One of the co-founders of operations research, Sir Charles Goodeve, also founded an Organization for Promoting Understanding of Society (OPUS) as a way to examine unconscious group processes that shape society and the institutions within it (L. Stapley, personal communication, June 8, 2003).

Churchman noted, "As the scientist's perspective widened, he began to think of his approach as the 'systems approach'" (p. x). In particular, refinements in the systems approach included developments in psychophysical systems, field theory methods, the understanding of social systems as defenses against anxiety, open systems thinking, and sociotechnical approaches. These five theoretical developments significantly influenced systems thinking and became the third element in the systems psychodynamics triad—the task and boundary awareness from open systems theory.

Trist and Murray (1990) wrote, "Historically, there have been two major conceptual schemes in the human sciences: that of the psycho-physical system, or organism, and that of social structure, or the institutional systems" (p. 540). Yet, as a result of field theory or action research conducted in the post-war period, Trist and others at the Tavistock Institute proposed a new conceptual scheme—the sociopsychological perspective—that enabled the sociological and psychological fields to become interrelated. They urged adoption of the term *sociopsychological* rather than the earlier term *psychosocial* to stress the examination of the influence of psychological forces on social systems (Trist & Murray, 1993, p. 29). Trist and Murray (1990) noted, "The source concepts which gave rise to the socio-psychological perspective are psychoanalytic object relations theory, Lewinian field theory, the personality-culture approach and the theory of open systems" (p. 37).

The premise of the sociopsychological perspective was that when one examines social systems one finds there are two undercurrents simultaneously influencing organizational life. On one level, there are *socio-factors* that influence reality within an organization such as the organization's structure; its products and services; and the organization's culture, policies, and procedures. On another level, there are *psycho-factors* that affect organizations such as the fears, anxieties, values, hopes, and beliefs of the people that work within them. To understand organizations more fully, one must examine both levels of activity. "Experiences during World War II had shown that psychoanalytic object relations theory could unify the psychological and social fields in a way that no other could" (Trist & Murray, 1993, p. 30).

Further research by Tavistock Institute staff members Elliot Jacques (1952) and Isabel Menzies (1960) into the use of social systems as a defense against anxiety proved to be pivotal to future developments in systems psychodynamics as well. These studies showed how organizations develop mechanisms to defend against the anxiety inherent in the system. These defense mechanisms establish methods of helping an organization's members deal with "disturbing emotional experiences—methods that are built into the way the organization works" (Menzies, 1960, p. 101).

In the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, studies in coal mines, textile mills, and hospitals conducted by Tavistock members Jacques, Rice, Miller, Trist, Bridger, and Menzies Lyth, among others, proved influential to the development of another important concept, the *sociotechnical perspective*. The sociotechnical system

provided a way to optimize both human elements and technological imperatives within organizations, without sacrificing one to the other. Yet, the sociotechnical system approach focused at the level of what Bion would have termed the *primary work group* (W. R. Bion, 1961) rather than the wider organization and its environment. Further developments in open system theory made it possible to look simultaneously at the relationships between the individual worker and the work group, the work group and the organization, and the organization and its environment. In other words, open systems theory built upon, yet expanded, the premise of the sociotechnical system in ways that permitted an understanding of the operation of the organization's internal dynamics as well as its interaction with its external environment.

As Rice (1965) described it, the classic model of an organization is one of a *closed system,* a mechanically self-sufficient organization neither importing nor exporting across the boundaries of the organization. Rice noted, *"Open systems,* in contrast, exist and can only exist by the exchange of materials with their environment. . .the process of importing, converting, and exporting materials is the work the system has to do to live" (cited in Miller, 1993, p. 10). Miller (1993) provided examples to illustrate Rice's point:

> Thus a manufacturing company coverts raw materials into saleable products (and waste), a college converts freshmen into graduates (and drop-outs) and there are the other resources that are required to bring about the processing: the production workers, the teachers, the machinery, the supplies, etc. The boundary across which these materials flow in and out both separates the enterprise from and links it with its environment. (p. 11)

This permeable boundary region came to be viewed by open system theorists as a critical area for the exercise of leadership. If the boundary is too loose, it is possible that the outside environment can become too influential and disruptive to the internal work of the organization. If the boundary is too rigid, the internal organization can stagnate and become inflexible to market or environmental changes. Miller (1993) wrote, "Survival is therefore contingent on an appropriate degree of insulation and permeability in the boundary region" (p. 11).

The idea of boundary management has also been applied to thinking about an individual's boundary management. Miller (1993) and Rice (1965) incorporated Freud and Klein's theories into their thinking by equating the ego function in individuals with the boundary region. Rice (1965) described this notion as follows:

> In the mature individual, the ego—the concept of the self as a unique individual—mediates the relationships between the internal world of good and bad objects and the external world of reality, and thus takes, in relations to the personality, a "leadership" role. (p. 11)

Therefore, when one is involved in organizational or group life, one is influenced both by the external environment of the work setting and by one's internal environment that is largely a product of previous work and childhood experiences. In Rice's (1965) words, "The mature ego is one that can define the boundary between what is inside and what is outside, and can control the transactions between the one and the other" (p. 11). However, the group can also

evoke more primitive feelings in the individual, such as those "in the areas of dependency aggression and hope. The individual is usually unaware of this process: these basic emotions slip under the guard, as it were, of his ego function" (Miller, 1993, p. 19).

Even though these primitive feelings and defenses might go undetected by the individual, they often have an impact on the group and are sensed by others within the organization. According to Rice (1965), "The tendency for most human beings to split the good from the bad in themselves and to project their resultant feelings upon others is one of the major barriers to the understanding and control of behaviour [sic]" (p. 11). When people come together in groups, individuals' primitive feelings and defenses can get mobilized on behalf of, and in service to, the group and the bad feelings are often the split off and projected onto authority figures, whose task it is to regulate the boundary region. As one method to study people's struggles with these types of authority issues, the Tavistock Institute developed the group relations conference in the late 1950s. In this way, they created an experiential learning method that linked psychoanalytic theory with the notion of open systems theory that was developed in the social sciences.

In addition to the development of the group relations conference, a second result of the amalgamation of open systems theory with psychoanalytic theory was an expanded definition of Bion's notion of a group's *task*. As discussed previously, Bion postulated that a group can be understood to operate potentially at two levels: the sophisticated work group level that is oriented toward overt task completion, and the basic assumption level that sometimes supports, but more often hinders, the overt task by acting out one of three possible defenses (W. R. Bion, 1961; Gabriel, 1999; Miller, 1993). Rice (1965) used open systems theory and its notion of external influences to reconceptualize the notion of the group's task. Rice called the task that an organization or group "must perform if it is to survive" (p. 17) the group's *primary task*.

Rice's definition of primary task is nuanced. His appreciation of the contextual factors constraining any organization's performance recognized the importance of examining an organization in its full environmental context, including historical and social influences. Rice emphasized how important the contextual factors constraining an organization's performance were to an assessment of that organization's ability to survive.

In *Learning for Leadership,* Rice (1965) outlined the complex set of tasks that most enterprises must perform simultaneously. In most cases, he argued, one task above all was the critical one. An organization must perform this primary task if it was to continue to be the organization it claimed to be. Rice further argued that environmental constraints such as political, economic, legal, and social contexts within which an organization operates further influence an organization's primary task (Rice, 1965).

An example of how an organization's primary task can shift in an open system due to environmental changes can be found in the days and months after the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. Whether the organization's primary task had been educating children, flying commercial airliners, or winning football games in the National Football League, organizational priorities shifted in response to these environmental changes. Many organizations

adopted a new primary task, at least temporarily, of safety, security, or as Rice would put it "survival."

Concluding Thoughts

Today's organizations are continuously challenged to keep pace with rapidly changing environments and emerging technologies in a globalized marketplace. "Everywhere in society the pace of change is accelerating" (Klein, Gabelnick, & Herr, 1998, p. ix). As a result, old organizational paradigms will no longer be sufficient to address future organizational needs. Krantz (2001) noted:

> Major organizational change efforts pose great psychic challenges to their members and require, in response, distinctive conditions in order to adequately contain the profound anxieties evoked by such upheaval. And, in the absence of these conditions change efforts are likely to fail, in part because members will tend to employ primitive and destructive defenses to protect themselves from the painful anxieties and fears that attend disruption and turmoil. (p. 134)

These challenges heighten the requirement for leaders at all levels within organizations to better understand systems psychodynamics to survive in today's competitive market.

As this review of the history of psychology has demonstrated, psychology has made important contributions to the study of groups—both unorganized, amorphous groups such as crowds and organized, structured groups such as organizations. An understanding of the history of psychology's long trajectory of influence on the study of organizations enables us to better appreciate the impact of contemporary psychology on the study of leadership and the dynamics of change in today's organizations. An understanding of the historical roots of systems psychodynamics not only allows us to recognize and respect the developments made by our predecessors but also allows us to connect these to subsequent developments in the field.

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