

# Systems Psychodynamics: The Formative Years (1895–1967)

Amy L. Fraher

Although *systems psychodynamics* is not a new field, there has been an inadequate appreciation of the formative years of the traditions that shaped it. Consequently, contemporary group relations and systems psychodynamics scholars most familiar with current incarnations of the theory and practice of group study have been cut off from the legacy of a rich and complex tradition that has shaped the field and can continue to provide important insights into practical and theoretical dilemmas confronting students of group behaviour. By providing an historical account of the intellectual foundations of the Tavistock model and the application of this method to the study of groups and organizations, this essay attempts to reintegrate *systems psychodynamics* with its own foundations and tells a story of the evolution of an orthodoxy, a core tradition of group study from which all sorts of off-shoots, critiques, and other models have flowed.<sup>1</sup> It is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, it discusses the formative years from the late 1800s, with developments in psychoanalysis and theories about groups and systems, until 1967 when Miller and Rice outlined their approach to studying organizations and attempted to systematically integrate these disciplines at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London. Throughout the essay, the impact of social, political, and cultural influences during this historical period will be explored.

Scholars generally associate the term *systems psychodynamics* with the publication of Miller and Rice's seminal volume *Systems of Organization* in 1967 (Gould, Stapley and Stein, 2001). Yet, Miller and Rice never explicitly used the term in this book. It was not until the late 1980s that Eric J. Miller, then director of the Tavistock Institute's Group Relations Programme, coined the term *systems psychodynamics*. From then, the concept just 'caught on' (L. Gould, personal communication, 8 May, 2003). By 1997, when Mannie Sher replaced Miller as director of the Group Relations Programme, the term was 'in vogue at

---

Address for correspondence: 4704 Miracle Drive, San Diego CA 92115.  
Email: amy@paradoxandcompany

the Institute and used widely by Eric, Richard Holti and Jean Neumann' (M. Sher, personal communication, 12 May, 2003). Not until 1999, when Jean Neumann published 'Systems psychodynamics in the service of political organizational change', did anyone explicitly use the concept in a scholarly publication.

The first mention of the term '*system psychodynamics*' in print was in the Tavistock Institute's 1992/1993 *Review*. The Institute's annual report provides an overview of the work during the year, including publications, activities, developments, interests, and concerns of Institute staff. 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 none the less that 'the Tavistock Institute's own activities in this field have not been expanding' (*Review*, 1993, p. 42). He concluded that it was necessary to 'redevelop this heartland area of the Institute' (*Review*, 1993, p. 42) and recommended a new conceptual strategy, termed *system psychodynamics*, with which to accomplish this task.

The two main thrusts of this emergent strategy were:

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. (*Review*, 1993, p. 42)

In response, three external Programme Advisers were appointed in early 1992 – Wesley Carr, Tim Dartington, and Olya Khaleelee – and, along with former Tavistock Institute staff member Isabel Menzies Lyth and current staff member Jean Neumann, they undertook this redevelopment project. And so the term *system psychodynamics*, later transformed into *systems psychodynamics*, came into existence. Yet, its theoretical underpinnings emerged in the late 1800s

## I. PSYCHOANALYTIC ROOTS

The first element shaping *systems psychodynamics* is to be found in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis which developed during the Victorian era, a period characterized by a conservative social climate, accompanied by rapid advances in science, medicine, and technological knowledge. Although Sigmund Freud is not known primarily as a group theorist,<sup>2</sup> his psychoanalytic theories about individuals and speculations about group and organizational dynamics provided the theoretical foundation of *systems psychodynamics*. Later, Melanie

Klein's (1946) *object relations theory* both built upon and departed from Freud's theories.

Gould (1997) noted 'Klein postulates early development as being comprised of two distinct but overlapping developmental positions, called respectively *paranoid—schizoid* and the *depressive positions*' (p. 17). Using these positions, she described how people learn from a very early age ways to cope with unpleasant emotions, and the resultant confusion and anxiety such emotions create, by using two predominant psychological defenses: *splitting* and *projective identification*.

For example, in the *paranoid—schizoid position*, Klein theorized that in order for the infant to reconcile the confusion between the nurturing and satisfying breast/mother and the frustrating and withholding breast/mother, the infant *splits* the breast/mother into two separate beings, or *objects*. One object is seen as nurturing and good; the other object is seen as frustrating and bad. In a similar manner, infants also learn ways to distance themselves psychologically from these negative and destructive emotions by disowning their uncomfortable feelings and *projecting* them on to someone else.

As the infant grows older it attempts to reconcile this conflict in the *depressive position*, recognizing its mother, and others as well, as whole objects containing both good and bad parts. Although Klein's work predominantly focused on children, her definition of the *paranoid—schizoid* and *depressive positions* were later applied to adults and adult behaviour by group theorists, in particular, by her analysand Wilfred Bion.

Ironically, at the same time that many theorists were trying to gain a deeper understanding of group behaviour, European disharmony grew to the point of war in 1914. However, the war also became a laboratory of sorts for the psychological study of human behaviour. For example, military leaders in Europe started to identify what they referred to as nervous disorders or psychological ailments among their troops. They used the term *shell-shock* to describe these ailments, regardless of symptoms. Prior to this time, any instability exhibited by a soldier was classified as cowardice or malingering, often punishable by death. Yet later research revealed, '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 the First World War finally ended in 1918, the horrors it had caused fostered revulsion for war and added considerable impetus to the hope that future conflicts could be avoided through a clearer understanding of human behaviour and diplomacy.

As a result of psychological lessons learned during the First World War, 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 founders of the Tavistock Clinic consisted of professionals from a variety of backgrounds, including anthropology, psychology, neurology, psychiatry and sociology, fostering a tolerance for and integration of different professional viewpoints—a characteristic which has remained a common element in the clinic's work ever since (Klein, 1978; Trist & Murray, 1990).

## II. GROUP RELATIONS THEORY: FORMATIVE HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

Group relations, the second element in the systems psychodynamics triad, is an interdisciplinary field that embraces psychodynamic principles and experiential learning methods in order to study the group as a holistic social system. Contributions made by sociologists such as Le Bon and McDougall, psychoanalysts such as Freud and Bion, social scientists such as Lewin, and anthropologists such as Rice and Miller, along with a cadre of others, proved to be pivotal in the early developments of group relations theories and methods.

### *Contributions of Le Bon and McDougall*

Although they never identified as group relations theorists, *per se*, Gustave Le Bon and William McDougall provided key observations about group behaviour by introducing the idea of studying the group-as-a-whole within a social system and the individuals' relatedness to that system. This shift from a 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 in this sense it is not simply applied psychoanalysis, but a related field, with its own concepts and praxis.

The history of group-as-a-whole thinking can be traced back to 1896 when Le Bon, a French sociologist, published his now classic book, *The Crowd*, in which he developed a theory about the behaviour of large, unorganized groups. 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. 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 a crowd by playing on the crowd’s child-like credulity and untethered emotions in a manner that Freud (1922) observed, ‘as being actually hypnotic’ (p. 8).

Although Le Bon’s work had been cited frequently within the psychoanalytic tradition at the time, not everyone agreed with his theories about group behaviour. Freud (1922), for example, spent fifteen of the seventy-five pages of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* quoting and paraphrasing the work of Le Bon, both lauding and then dismissing 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). Further, Freud interpreted Le Bon’s appraisal of the group mind as a reflection of his contempt for the masses and fear of social upheaval.

Others joined Freud’s dismissal of Le Bon’s contributions. Harrison (2000), for example, observed, similar to Freud, 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). Kraskovic also criticized Le Bon’s theories for being overly negative, arguing, ‘The group contained within itself the seeds of both success and failure’ (Anthony, 1972, p. 3).

Despite these criticisms, in 1920, McDougall, a British-born American social theorist, expanded upon Le Bon’s work, developing important insights about behaviour in organized groups. Like Le Bon, McDougall (1920) believed that unorganized groups were emotional, impulsive, violent, and suggestible and, at times, acted almost like a wild beast. He added, however, that when a group is organized and task-oriented, especially small groups, the intensification of emotion in each individual group member, which was seldom attained under any other conditions, could be harnessed effectively for positive group achievement.

#### *The contributions of Freud*

Although Freud focused predominantly on the individual, he none the less made influential contributions to the field of group relations in at least three ways. First, as Ashbach and Schermer (1987) noted, ‘psychoanalysis has, from its inception, been concerned with the family and group situation’ (p. 4). Bion (1961) agreed noting ‘there is ample evidence for Freud’s idea that the family group provides the basic pattern for all groups’ (p. 187).

Second, supporting McDougall's theories about organized versus unorganized group behaviour, Freud (1922) was one of the first to identify this difference as regression. He claimed that joining a group causes 'an unmistakable picture of a regression of mental activity to an earlier stage.' (p. 49). Yet, Freud hypothesized that 'in organized and artificial groups it can to a large extent be checked' (p. 49) and redirected through appropriate leadership interventions.

By examining church and army life, Freud explored the influence of the leader on the psychological functioning of the group. He concluded, 'it is leaders who hold groups together, not so much through their actions and decisions, as through the position which they occupy in the unconscious life of groups' (Gabriel, 1999, p. 117). Yet, Bion (1961) disagreed observing 'To me the leader is as much the creature of the basic assumption as any other member of the group' (p. 177).

Although group theorists have disputed some of Freud's observations about groups, as evidenced above, he remains influential none the less. He laid the foundation for the development of group relations theories by being one of the first to hypothesize about the unconscious influence of family memories, regression and leadership on group behaviour.

#### *The contributions of Lewin*

A fourth contributor to the foundation of group relations was social scientist Kurt Lewin. Living in Germany during the First World War, 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 using 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 psycho-sociological influences over group behaviours. 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, 1948, p. vii). By providing the elusive conceptual framework to examine group behaviour Lewin's theories, known at the time as *applied psychology* or *field theory*, provided a way in which the tension between 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 thereby demystifying the nature of group life. He 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. (Lewin, 1947, p. 8)

Lewin's philosophies exerted significant influence over members of the Tavistock Institute at the time. Miller (1993) noted '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.

A final important contribution to the history of group relations provided by Lewin was an almost accidental discovery during a 1946 workshop in Connecticut. Lewin and his colleagues were experimenting with his hypothesis that adults learn more effectively through interactive experiences shared in experiential learning environments rather than traditional lectures and seminars. The results of this first experiential workshop contributed to the development of *here-and-now* theories and the human laboratory that subsequently influenced development of the group relations conference.

#### *The contributions of Bion*

The fifth, and seminal, contribution was made by Bion, among others, during the Second World War and directly led to the development of the field of group relations as an *intelligible field of study*. Manpower shortages during the war severely hampered British military success and as a result many members of the Tavistock Clinic volunteered to join the war effort. Colloquially referred to as the *Tavistock group* or the *invisible college*, this group included Bion, John Rickman, Harold Bridger, Tom Main, Eric Trist, Tommy Wilson and John Sutherland, among others.

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 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. (Trist, 1985, p. 14)

In response to this need, Bion devised a *therapeutic community*, outlined in a document called the *Wharnclyffe Memorandum* in 1939. The premise of the therapeutic community was to employ the entire hospital environment as a therapeutically engaged social system useful in the treatment of patients by shifting the focus from individual to group-based treatment, leadership education, and an emphasis on social obligation. Of paramount importance in this connection was the notion that the group analyses its own dynamics and develops a plan of action, rather than wait for outside direction from authority figures.

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 the field of group relations.

Like many organizations after the war, the Tavistock Clinic was challenged to pick up the pieces that remained of their 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 modelled his new findings about groups, helping 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: (1) exploration of the role of outpatient psychiatry based on a dynamic approach and orientated towards the social sciences in the as yet undefined settings of the new National Health Service and (2) the incorporation of the Tavistock Institute *for the study of wider social problems* not currently seen as being within the purview of the mental health profession (Trist and Murray, 1990). As a result, the Tavistock Institute was founded in 1946.

The post-Second World War period could be classified as the birth era of the field of group relations as many people excitedly experimented with the knowledge gained from their wartime experiences. Central to this exploration were that of Bion and his fellow members of the Tavistock Clinic, then Tavistock Institute, in England and Lewin and the National Training Laboratory (NTL) in America. The NTL's contributions proved pivotal with the development of its human laboratory, an experiential method of studying groups in the here-and-now, 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 employing the group techniques he had honed through his experiences in the Second World War. 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 in order to assess the group's reaction. Rosenbaum (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 not as the behaviour of individual group members, but as the group's dynamic as a whole.

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 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). (Trist, 1985, p. 30)

Experimenting with shifting from the clinician's gaze *outside* the phenomenon to an 'outsider within' perspective, Bion used the concepts of transference and counter-transference and himself as an instrument to study group behaviour. That is, he made himself available for the group to disown their uncomfortable feelings and project them on to him as a means to understand the group's unconscious behaviour (Gabriel, 1999). As Trist (1985) put it, 'He made it safe for the group to dramatize its unconscious situation' (p. 31).

Gould noted,

Bion's overarching point, following Klein, is that the material that emerges in groups more often closely approximates very early (*pre-Oedipal*) part-object relationships, and associated primitive phantasies and psychotic anxieties, than it does the more fully developed *Oedipal* stage interplay of whole-object relationships which form the core of Freud's group psychology' (Gould, 1997, p. 18).

These theories proved to be the link Bion needed to join theories describing 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 very 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 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 writing, Bion (1961) hypothesized that groups have two modes of operation, the productive *sophisticated group*, more commonly called a *work group*, and the *basic assumption group* with its primary task of easing the group's anxieties about the pain or emotions that further work might bring. Much has been written about Bion's contributions, in particular, his three basic assumption modes: *dependence*, *pairing*, and *fight-flight*. 'Bion's theory has generated a voluminous literature' (Miller, 1998) in the area of psychodynamic studies. Yet it is not the goal of this essay to explore further this area, but to concentrate on the broader historical implications of these contributions.

Even after he left the field, Bion's theories continued to be interpreted and evolved by other theoreticians. Jaques, 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 defence 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 twelve 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 two 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 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* (1958). 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, becoming known as *The Leicester Conference* or simply *Leicester*. 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 further expanding the application of group relations theories and practices.

Sher noted 'It started off the idea of a laboratory' and 'Rice would have been talking to people like Trist, Turquet, Gosling, and Eric Miller of course, and others.' The idea was that 'Rice's clients would come to this laboratory, and Miller's clients, and Turquet's clients' and these clients would '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' and its application to 'the ongoing consultation that Rice and others were having with their client organizations' (M. Sher, personal communication, 15 January 2002).

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 cultural island or temporary institution which would provide a realistic 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 clients' organizations. 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 event (Fraher, 2004).

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 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. (Miller, 1989, 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. Yet certain conference events have become hallmarks of the Leicester Conference design. Fraher (2002) noted some of these hallmarks, gleaned from a review of thirty-two Leicester Conference brochures:<sup>3</sup>

1. *Small Study Group*: Every conference member is assigned to a small study group, which is made up of approximately nine to twelve 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. *Large Study Group*: 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 inter-personal relationships. It is not

uncommon for sub-groups 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. *Inter-Group and Institutional Events*: An inter-group event, not included in the first conference design, was successfully added in 1959 largely through the work of Harold Bridger. During the inter-group event, members are free to form their own subgroups within the pre-determined conference groups in order 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.<sup>4</sup> Consultants are available upon request during both events.
4. *Review and Application Groups*: Near the end of the conference, all members are assigned to review and application groups made up of five to ten people from similar or complementary backgrounds. The goal of the application group is for members to reflect on their conference experience in order to consider how their 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 upon their own authority which conference experiences and learning is valuable to them. Therefore, Miller 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. (Miller, 1993, 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 Bertalanffy (1950) came to the attention of social scientists at the Tavistock Institute. Trist and Murray 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. (Trist and Murray, 1993, p. 30)

The amalgamation of open systems thinking with the Institute's previously popular socio-psychological perspective resulted in the creation of a new paradigm: the socio-technical perspective. This perspective set the stage for the emergence of *systems psychodynamics* approximately thirty years later.

### III. SYSTEMS THEORY

The third and final element in the *systems psychodynamics* triad is the influence of systemic perspectives. Systems thinking was, of course, not novel even in the late nineteenth century. In fact, Churchman (1968) claimed that systemic thinking can be traced back at least as far as Plato's *Republic* in 400 BC. 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.

Prior to the Second World War, work being done at the Tavistock Clinic and then later 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 the Second World War 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). For example, 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, 8 June, 2003).

As application of this scientific thinking expanded, it became known as a 'systems approach'. In particular, refinements in the systems approach included developments in psycho-physical systems, field

theory methods, understanding social systems as defences against anxiety, open systems thinking and socio-technical approaches. These five theoretical developments significantly influenced systems thinking and the third element in the *systems psychodynamics* triad: the task and boundary awareness from open systems theory.

Trist 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' (Trist and Murray, 1990, p. 540). Yet, as a result of field theory and action research conducted in the post-war period, Trist and others at the Tavistock Institute proposed a new conceptual scheme, that of the *socio-psychological perspective*. They urged adoption of the term 'socio-psychological,' rather than the earlier term psycho-social, in order to stress the interrelatedness of psychological forces and social systems (Trist and 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 socio-psychological perspective was that when one examines social systems one finds there are two undercurrents simultaneously influencing organizational life: *socio-factors* such as the organization's structure, products/services, policies, and procedures and *psycho-factors* such as the members' fears, anxieties, values, hopes, and beliefs. In order to understand organizations more fully, one must examine both levels of activity.

Further research by Tavistock Institute staff members Elliot Jaques (1952) and Isabel Menzies (1960) into the use of social systems as a defence against anxiety proved 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 both alleviating and exacerbating the anxiety of members within it. These defence mechanisms establish methods of helping an organization's members deal with 'disturbing emotional experiences – methods which 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 Jaques, Rice, Miller, Trist, Bridger, and Menzies Lyth, among others, all proved influential to the development of another important concept, the *socio-technical perspective*. The socio-technical system provided a way to optimize both human elements and technological imperatives within organizations, without sacrificing one to the other. Yet, the socio-technical system approach focused at the level of what Bion would have termed the

primary work group (Bion, 1961) rather than the wider organization and its environment.

Further developments by Miller and Rice (1967) 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, the organization and its environment. In other words, open systems theory built upon, yet expanded, the premise of the socio-technical 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 provided examples to illustrate Rice's point:

Thus a manufacturing company converts 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. (Miller, 1993, 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. But 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).

In addition to regulating the external boundaries of the organization, another type of boundary management can be found in the regulation of sentient-group boundaries or roles. In order to understand better the underlying organizational dynamics, one needs to examine the complex interrelatedness of authority, leadership and roles within and between groups in organizations. Jaques noted:

The significance of having a clear perception of the organizational structure of a concern lies in the fact that structure defines roles and role relationships

... The regard held for a person in a given situation is a combination of his prestige and the status of the role he occupies, while conversely the status of a role may undergo change due to the prestige of the person who occupies it. (Jaques, 1952, pp. 250–251)

Both Miller (1993) and Rice (1965) explored this idea of individual boundary management, incorporating Freud and Klein's theories into their own by equating the ego function in individuals with the boundary region. Rice 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'. (Rice, 1965, p. 11)

Therefore, when one is involved in organizational or group life, one is influenced both by both the roles and the external environment of the work setting, as well as by one's own 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).

Yet, even though these primitive feelings and defences 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 defences can get mobilized on behalf of, and in service to, the group, and the bad feelings are often split off and projected on to authority figures, whose task it is to regulate the boundary region.

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, which is orientated towards 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 defences (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*.

Yet, 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, p. 18).

As one method to study people's struggles with organizational life, the Tavistock Institute developed the group relations conference in the late 1950s, creating an experiential learning method that linked psychoanalytic theory with the study of boundaries, task and roles in a temporary organization.

As this review of the history of the field of *systems psychodynamics* has demonstrated, many disciplines have made important contributions to the study of groups – both unorganized, amorphous groups, such as crowds, and organized, structured groups, such as organizations. Appreciating the long trajectory of influence on the history of *systems psychodynamics* not only allows us to recognize and respect the developments made by our predecessors but also to connect these to subsequent developments in the field.

#### *Acknowledgements*

I would like to thank the following people for their guidance in the creation of this paper: Wesley Carr, Laurence J. Gould, Kathleen B. Jones, Olya Khaleelee, Eric J. Miller, Jean Neumann, Mannie Sher, Lionel Stapley, and the anonymous reviewers of O&SD. Although their guidance was immensely helpful, the responsibility for the final version of this essay is mine alone.

## Notes

1. Special thanks to the editors of O&SD for providing this felicitous phrasing.
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).
3. 1963 to 2002, excluding 1977 and 1986 to 1989.
4. For example, the 'A' sub-conference, the 'B' sub-conference and the Training Group might have separate inter-group events but might all participate in a joint institutional event.

## References

- Anthony, E. J. (1972) 'The history of group psychotherapy', in H. I. Kaplan and B. J. Sadock, (eds), *The Evolution of Group Therapy*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
- Ashbach, C. and Schermer, V. L. (1987) *Object Relations, the Self, and the Group*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bertalanffy, L. von (1950) 'The theory of open systems in physics and biology'. *Science*, 3: 22–29.
- Bion, W. R. (1961) *Experiences in Groups*. London: Routledge.
- Churchman, C. W. (1968) *The Systems Approach*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Dicks, H. V. (1970) *Fifty Years of the Tavistock Clinic*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Fraher, A. L. (2002) 'The development of the Tavistock and Tavistock-inspired group relations movement in Great Britain and the United States: A comparative and historical perspective'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation University of San Diego, California.
- Fraher, A. L. (2004) *A History of Group Study and Psychodynamic Organizations*. London: Free Association Books.
- Freud, S. (1913) *Totem and Taboo*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Freud, S. (1922) *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Freud, S. (1946) *Civilization and its Discontents*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Gabriel, Y. (1999) *Organizations in Depth*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gould, L. J. (1997) 'Correspondences between Bion's basic assumption theory and Klein's developmental positions: an outline'. *Free Associations*, 7(41): 15–30.
- Gould, L. Stapley, L. F. and Stein, M. (eds) (2001) *The Systems Psychodynamics of Organizations*. New York: Karnac.

- Harrison, T. (2000) *Bion, Rickman, Foulkes and the Northfield Experiments: Advancing on a Different Front*. London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Hirsch, J. I. (1987) *The History of the National Training Laboratories 1947–1986*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Jacques, E. (1952) *The Changing Culture of a Factory*. New York: The Dryden Press.
- Klein, E. B. (1978) 'An overview of recent Tavistock work in the United States', in C. L. Cooper and C. P. Alderfer (eds), *Advances in Experiential Social Processes, Volume I*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Klein, M. (1946) 'Notes on some schizoid mechanisms', in J. Mitchell (ed.), *The Selected Melanie Klein*. London: Penguin.
- Le Bon, G. (1896) *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. London: Ernest Benn.
- Lewin, K. (1947) 'Frontiers in group dynamics: I'. *Human Relations*, 1: 5–41.
- Lewin, K. (1948) *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*. New York: Harper and Row.
- McDougall, W. (1920) *The group mind*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Menzies, I. (1960) 'The functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety', in I. Menzies Lyth, *Containing Anxiety in Institutions*. London: Free Association Books.
- Miller, E. J. (1989) *The Leicester Model: Experiential Study of Group and Organizational Processes*. TIHR Occasional Paper No. 10. London: The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.
- Miller, E. (1993) *From Dependency to Autonomy: Studies in Organization and Change*. London: Free Association Books.
- Miller, E. J. (1998) 'A note on the protomental system and "groupishness": Bion's basic assumptions revisited'. *Human Relations*, 51(12): 1495–1508.
- Miller, E. J. and Rice, A. K. (1967) *Systems of Organization*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Neumann, J. E. (1999) 'Systems psychodynamics in the service of political organizational change', in R. French and R. Vince (eds), *Group Relations, Management, and Organization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rice, A. K. (1958) *Productivity and Social Organization: The Ahmedabad Experiment*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Rice, A. K. (1965) *Learning for Leadership*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Rioch, M. J. (1996) 'Personal perspectives' (in memoriam, reprinted from *Models of Achievements: Reflections of Eminent Women in Psychology*, 1983, New York: Columbia University Press.)

- Rosenbaum, M. (1976) 'Group psychotherapy', in M. Rosenbaum and A. Snadowsky (eds), *The Intensive Group Experience*. New York: The Free Press.
- Tavistock Institute (1993) *Review*, London: Tavistock Institute.
- Trist, E. (1985) 'Working with Bion in the 1940s: The group decade', in M. Pines (ed.), *Bion and Group Psychotherapy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Trist, E. and Murray, H. (eds) (1990) *The Social Engagement of Social Science: A Tavistock Anthology, Volume I: The Socio-psychological Perspective*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Trist, E., & Murray, H. (eds) (1993) *The Social Engagement of Social Science: A Tavistock Anthology, Volume II: The Socio-technical Perspective*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press