Eric Trist

Eric Lansdown Trist (September 11, 1909 – June 4, 1993) was a British scientist and leading figure in the field of organizational development (OD). He was one of the founders of the Tavistock Institute for Social Research in London.[1]

1 Biography

Trist was born in 1909 in Dover, England of a Cornish father and a Scottish mother. He grew up in Dover experiencing dramatic air raids in the first world war. He went to Cambridge University - Pembroke College in 1928, where he read English Literature, graduating with first-class honours. Influenced heavily by his don I. A. Richards he became interested in Psychology, Gestalt psychology, and Psychoanalysis, and went on to read psychology under Frederic Bartlett. At that time (1932/3) Trist has said he was very interested in articles by Kurt Lewin. When Kurt Lewin (who was Jewish) left Germany as Adolf Hitler came to power, he travelled to Palestine via the USA, stopping off in England, where Trist briefly met him and showed him around Cambridge.[2]

Trist graduated in Psychology in 1933, with a distinction, and went to Yale University in the USA and again met Lewin, who was at Cornell University and then Iowa. He visited B. F. Skinner, a key figure in Behaviourism in Boston.[3] After witnessing some disturbing experiences during the Depression, he became politically interested for the first time, and read Karl Marx.

Returning to England in 1935, Trist met Oscar Oeser, who headed the psychology department at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, and went on to study unemployment in Dundee.

At the outbreak of the second world war Trist became a clinical psychologist at the Maudsley Hospital, London, treating war casualties from Dunkirk. He recalls how, in 1940, in the London blitz, "some very frightened people came out of their rooms, ran all over the grounds and we had to go and find them." The Maudsley, at Mill Hill, was a teaching hospital, and Trist attended seminars and met people from the Tavistock Clinic, whom he was keen to join. Opposed by his boss, Sir Aubrey Lewis, who wouldn't let him go, he joined the Tavistock group in the army, as a way of getting free, and was replaced by Hans Eysenck. Trist went to Edinburgh and worked on the war office selection boards (WOSB), with Jock Sutherland and Wilfred Bion. For the last two years of the war, Trist was chief psychologist to the civil resettlements units (CRUs) for repatriated prisoners of war, working to schemes devised by Tommy Wilson and Wilfred Bion. He described this as "probably the most exciting single experience of my professional life".

In July 1966, following the death of his first wife, and marriage to Beulah, Trist moved to America as Professor of Organizational Behavior and Social Ecology in the Graduate School of Business Administration at UCLA. In 1969 he joined Russel Ackoff in the Social Systems Science Program (S-cubed) at the Wharton School, the University of Pennsylvania. He taught there until 1978 when he became an emeritus professor. In that same year he joined the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, Toronto where he initiated a program in future studies and taught there until 1983.[2]

In the 1990s Trist wrote a three-volume account of the Tavistock, along with Hugh Murray and Fred Emery, *The Social Engagement of Social Science*. He died on 4 June 1993.

2 Work

2.1 Influences of Kurt Lewin

Trist was heavily influenced by Kurt Lewin, whom he met first 1933 in Cambridge, England.[4] Kurt Lewin had moved from studying behaviour to engineering its change, particularly in relation to racial and religious conflicts, inventing sensitivity training, a technique for making people more aware of the effect they have on others, which some claim as the beginning of political correctness.

This would later influence the direction of much of work at the Tavistock Institute, in the direction of management and, some would say, manipulation, rather than fundamental research into human behaviour and the psyche. It was a partnership between Trist's group at the Tavistock, and Lewin's at MIT that launched the Journal 'Human Relations' just before Lewin's death in 1947.

2.2 The Tavistock group

It was the wartime experiences of Trist and his various associates that created what became known as 'the

Tavistock group', which formed a planning committee to meet and plan the future of the Tavistock after the war. The Tavistock Institute was formed, with Trist as deputy chairman, and Tommy Wilson as chairman, with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in February 1946, and a new Tavistock Clinic became part of the newly formed National Health Service. Many of the group went into formal Psychoanalytic training.

Trist was much influenced by Melanie Klein, who visited the Tavistock, as well as by his colleagues John Bowlby, Donald Winnicott, Wilfred Bion and Jock Sutherland. Though close to Wilfred Bion during the war, Trist later wrote that he was glad he did not join Bion at this point, because "he left groups in the 1950s – which flummoxed everybody – and got completely absorbed in psychoanalysis", adding, "that was when the cult of Bion – a wrong cult in my view – became established."

Trist and the Tavistock became involved in industrial projects until 1951, and was given the Lewin Award in 1951. The family discussion group was formed, and John Bowlby did his world-famous studies on mother-child separation and the establishment of family systems therapy. With cooperation and contributions from Kurt Lewin in the USA, the publication of *Human Relations*, the Tavistock Journal began, and Trist commented that this gave the Tavistock credibility in the USA, saying, "its articles wouldn't have been accepted by any of the other British psychological journals".

2.3 Organizational research

In 1949, his organizational research work, studying work crews in a coal mine, with Ken Bamforth, resulted in the famous article, "Some Social and Psychological Consequences of the Longwall Method of Coal Getting."

2.4 Socio-technical systems

Trist also collaborated with Fred Emery on developing the socio-technical systems approach to work design.

3   Publications

- Trist, E., and Bamforth, W., *Some Social and Psychological Consequences of the Long Wall Method of Coal-Getting*, ín: Human Relations, Vol. 4, 3-38, 1951.

- Trist, E., and Sofer, C., *Exploration in Group Relations*, Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1959.

- Emery F. and Trist E., *The Causal Texture of Organizational Environments*, in: Human Relations, Vol 18 (1) p21-32, 1965.

- Emery F. and Trist E., *Toward a Social Ecology*, 1972.

- Trist, Eric L. et al., *The Social Engagement of Social Science: A Tavistock Anthology : The Socio-Ecological Perspective (Tavistock Anthology)*, University of Pennsylvania, May 1997. ISBN 0-8122-8194-2

4   See also

- Isabel Menzies Lyth

- Socio-analysis

5   References

[1] Anna DiStefano, Kjell Erik Rudestam, Robert Silverman (2003) *Encyclopedia of Distributed Learning*. p.413

[2] Eric Miller (1993-06-14). "Obituary: Eric Trist - People - News". The Independent. Retrieved 2012-09-03.

[3] Morgen Witzel (2005) *Encyclopedia of History of American Management*. p.507

[4] Peter Reason, Hilary Bradbury (2007) *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research*. p.78

6   External links

- Tavistock homepage.

- Eric Trist Biographical page.

- The Foundation and Development of the Tavistock Institute to 1989 by Eric Trist and Hugh Murray.

- Eric Trist works.

- Eric Trist Papers.

7 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

7.1 Text

- **Eric Trist** *Source:* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Trist?oldid=683601397 *Contributors:* Snoyes, Thseamon, Alan Liefting, Blankfaze, Bluemask, Mdd, Ian Pitchford, Hibana, RussBot, BrainyBroad, SmackBot, Chris the speller, Will Beback, Ken Gallager, JustAGal, Nick Number, Waacstats, Erkan Yilmaz, Memestream, BDantas, BOTijo, WikHead, Addbot, Lightbot, Omnipaedista, Full-date unlinking bot, Schwede66, RjwilmsiBot, WTM, ZéroBot, Jacobisq, TCSchafer, VIAFbot, Arielarry, Aloneinthewild, KasparBot and Anonymous: 7

7.2 Images

- **File:Wikiquote-logo.svg** *Source:* https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fa/Wikiquote-logo.svg *License:* Public domain *Contributors:* ? *Original artist:* ?

7.3 Content license