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THEORETICAL RESOURCE

Kurt Lewin at The Tavistock Institute

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ABSTRACT Notions of action research and of integrating object relations and field psychologies have exerted a steady influence on both the initial formation of The Tavistock Institute in London and on the subsequent 60 years of its professional identity and approach to work. These notions can be tied directly to early scientific contact with Kurt Lewin, and indirectly through the Lewinian philosophy that staff incorporated into an overall 'house style'. From 1990, however, changes in the Institute's funding environment undermined this historical source of integrity. Recent developments to reclaim and update the roots of Kurt Lewin at The Tavistock Institute.

Keywords: action research; Kurt Lewin; The Tavistock Institute; management history

Much of Kurt Lewin's legacy shaped both the formation of The Tavistock Institute itself, and the conceptualisation of its professional identity and approach to work. At least in the minds of the initial staff, Kurt Lewin was a 'shadow founder' of the Institute. Given that he died in 1947, the same year that the Institute was incorporated, Lewin's influence was not through an actual presence, but through 'relatedness'. That is, The Tavistock Institute's initial staff enacted a significant relationship in their minds with Kurt Lewin and his ideas. As the early volumes of *Human Relations* demonstrate, Institute staff worked in Britain, while Lewin's colleagues worked in America. Together and separately they prepared the ground for several fields that eventually constituted applied social science. Furthermore, that relatedness became embedded in the structural and ideological fabric of the Institute.

Three fairly distinct phases can be identified in the nearly 60-year relatedness between The Tavistock Institute and Kurt Lewin. For the first 25 years, scientific staff explicitly experimented with and applied Lewinian

ideas. In the subsequent two decades, approaches from the earlier period became institutionalised into a 'house style'. Since 1990, economic pressures resulted in the Institute losing site of its Lewinian legacy, only to re-engage relatedness to action research without apparent reference to field theory. These phases can be characterised as a decreasing degree of explicit influence reported by staff in their association with Lewin – a development consistent with the wider use of Lewinian theory internationally.

These thoughts on Kurt Lewin at The Tavistock Institute come, for the most part, from digging in internal Institute documents, studying volumes of *Human Relations* and drawing on published accounts of relations between the main actors. A special issue on Kurt Lewin (1992) proved particularly helpful for placing Lewinian thinking in a broader context of applied social and psychological sciences. Comments from people who knew Lewin or the Institute's founders help clarify 'back-stage developments' in the Institute's relatedness to this practical and theoretical tradition.

1947-1969: from 'social psychiatry' to action research

In 1946, the Tavistock Clinic received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to found a separate, independent organisation that would address 'wider problems not accepted in the area of mental health' (Dicks, 1970). They incorporated The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations as a not-for-profit organisation in 1947, stating these aims: 'the study of human relations in conditions of well-being, conflict and change, in the community, the work group and the larger organisation, and the promotion of the effectiveness of individuals and organisations'. Three founders – notably Eric Trist (a clinical and social psychologist), Wilfred Bion (a psychiatrist) and Jock Sutherland (a psychologist and psychoanalyst) – wanted to foster peace-time applications of war-time advances in 'social psychiatry'. Social psychiatry referred to a philosophy for treating mental health outpatients by looking at the pathology of the social setting that produced psychopathology in the individual (Dicks, 1970).

During World War II, the Institute's founders had used social psychiatry to advise the army about underlying factors related to morale and effectiveness. One significant change project, the War Office Selection Boards, recruited an enormous number of new officers in a way that cut through the conventional socio-economic class barriers. Another programme, the Civil Resettlement Units, established transitional communities that helped tens of thousands of returning prisoners-of-war to re-adapt to civilian life. The so-called 'Northfield experiments' focused on helping men 'to take responsibility for their own return to health', through a 'the process of creating and developing the community' in which they recovered (Bridger, 1990b, p. 75). After the War, the success of these programmes enhanced credibility for the newly formed Institute to contribute significantly to social reconstruction (Neumann & Miller, 1997).

Eric Trist met Lewin twice just before the War. In 1934, en route from Germany to the USA, Lewin stopped at Cambridge University to meet Sir

Frederick Bartlett, a distinguished psychologist. Bartlett's student, Trist, had been influenced by one of Lewin's articles. Bartlett invited him to tea to meet Lewin – a visit Trist described enthusiastically to Marrow (1969, p. 69). Two decades later, Trist repeated the story to Lewin's daughter, Miriam: she notes that Lewin was 44 (Lewin, 1992, p. 24). A much younger Trist was clearly in awe of the older Lewin's 'magic' (Marrow, 1969, p. 69) and 'poetic imagination' (Marrow, 1969, p. 222). They met a second time at a Yale seminar in 1936 (Marrow, 1969, p. 222). Trist remained impressed nine years later when he carried Lewinian ideas into the initial formation of The Tavistock Institute.

However, Trist was not the only Institute founder to be aware of Lewin. Dicks notes that 'In 1940-41 ... we see Hargreaves and A.T.M. Wilson already called up in the army as command psychiatrists, while mastering the sociological and disciplinary structure ... also digesting much social psychology, from Moreno to Kurt Lewin' (1970, pp. 102-103). While there is documentary evidence that Trist and Sutherland were already using Lewin's thinking, I have yet to find any evidence that the third founder, Bion, was so inclined.

Simultaneously with the creation of The Tavistock Institute, the founders decided to start a publishing company, Tavistock Publications Ltd, and a journal, *Human Relations*. While the Institute sold the former in 1959, it still owns and controls the latter. Marrow reports that Trist and Wilson 'wrote to Lewin asking whether he would consider establishing the journal [*Human Relations*] in partnership between Tavistock and his group at M.I.T. Trist remembers their excitement when they received Lewin's letter saying that he would' (Marrow, 1969, p. 222). In his introduction to an anthology of early work undertaken at the Institute, Trist states that 'a new journal was needed that would manifest the connection between field theory and object-relations psychoanalysis' (Trist & Murray, 1990, p. 8).

Lewin died in February 1947. Plans were being made for him to spend the academic year of 1947-48 at the Institute (Marrow, 1969, p. 223). Shock at his death can be gleaned in the first issue of *Human Relations* (Likert, 1947). The *in memoriam* was not actually identified as such: Lewin's name appeared first, at the beginning of 'other contributors to this issue' (Likert, 1947, p. 139). Only on the third page does a phrase indicate, 'it is a real loss to all of us not to have Lewin among us' (Likert, 1947, p. 133). For the remaining three issues in the first volume, Lewin was listed (ironically, given his Jewish heritage) with a little cross beside his name as part of the Editorial Committee.

From the beginning, staff at The Tavistock Institute used action research as their dominant mode for both research and practice. The initial volumes of *Human Relations*, no doubt, were influential in their developing identities and competence. Looking over these issues, the particular richness of the first eight volumes stands out. Almost every one of those 32 issues contains seminal work from researchers associated with the two collaborating organisations: Lewin, Bion, Jaques, Bowlby, Rice, Menzies, Trist, Herbst, Festinger and Bott.

However, Institute staff did not absorb all of Lewin's ideas about action research. Lewin was concerned about 'the systematic, preferably experimental, study of a social problem, and efforts at its solution' (Bargal et al, 1992, p. 8). While The Tavistock Institute was created precisely to study social problems and efforts at resolution, the Institute's staff were not orientated towards experimental (i.e. laboratory) psychology.

With historical roots in the Tavistock Clinic, the majority of the new staff extended into the field clinical research methods that aided observation and intervention. Miller notes that this pursuit 'was congruent with clinical research in medicine – and particularly perhaps in psychiatry – where research is conducted in the context of professional responsibility towards the patient' (Miller, 1997, personal communication). There was no Festinger amongst the early Institute researchers to push for modern statistical techniques of experimental design and analysis (Back, 1992, p. 57). Few Institute staff could be caricatured, as Festinger seems to have been, as a 'tough-minded, theory-oriented, pure experimental scientist'. Most Institute staff have been caricatured, as Lippitt seems to have been, as a 'fuzzy-mind, do-gooder, practitioner of applied social psychology' (Deutsch, 1992, p. 40; Miller & Rose, 1988).

With action research as their exciting new methodology, Institute social scientists created and discovered group and organisational innovations that continue to be influential worldwide. The significance of their work was recognised early in 1951 when the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) awarded to The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, the Kurt Lewin Memorial Award. Three years into its founding, therefore, the Institute was being recognised for its practical theories of 'socio-technical systems' and 'group relations'.

'Socio-technical systems', an approach to job and organisational design, emphasises the interconnections between psychological, technical, economic and other needs for flows of work, tasks, and roles (Herbst, 1962, 1974; Rice, 1963; Miller & Rice, 1967; Davis & Cherns, 1975; Miller, 1976; Davis & Taylor, 1979; Emery, 1993; Trist & Murray, 1993). The 'group relations' model applies the British 'object relations' school and social systems theory to the understanding of small, inter- and large group and institutional dynamics (Cartwright & Zander, 1960; Bridger, 1990a; Trist & Murray, 1990). The internationally known 'Leicester conference', operating since 1957, still provides an extensive opportunity to study authority, leadership and organisation from a group relations perspective (Miller, 1990).

Of course, Lewin was also associated with founding the National Training Laboratories (NTL) in Bethel, Maine. Miller credits NTL with 'a direct influence in the original concept of the Leicester conference' (1997, personal communication). Harold Bridger recalls that the Leicester conference was basically 'a Bion approach or methodology within an NTL frame; Eric Trist directed the first one and I directed the following ones until ... it was given to Ken Rice' (Miller, 1997, personal communication). Bridger went on to develop and direct the 'Tavistock Working Conferences', which

both incorporated and transcended elements of both small group approaches, notably introducing the idea of 'dual tasks' (Neumann, 1991).

Trist considered Lewinian ideas to be central to that action research which was most directly related to 'social psychiatry'. Towards the end of his career, he indicated the 'source concepts' for the socio-psychological perspective: 'the object relations approach, field theory, the personality-culture approach and systems theory, especially in its open system form' (Trist & Murray, 1990, p. 30). Those aspects of field theory that:

> appealed to several of the Tavistock psychiatrists' were Lewin's emphasis on the here-and-now, the Galilean as opposed to the Aristotelian philosophy of science ... the theory of joint causation expressed in the formula B = f(P,E) and ... his work on group decision-making and on the dynamics of social change. (Trist & Murray, 1990)

While Trist confirms that 'the socio-psychological perspective ... enables work at all system levels, from micro- to macro- to be covered in a single framework', he then goes on to state that 'the socio-technical perspective ... was entirely novel' (Trist & Murray, 1990). For most of the first two decades of the Institute's life, staff worked in fairly flexible groups more or less informally clustered around more senior staff. The work tended to be very project-based. The projects originating the socio-technical systems (STS) model were published throughout 1950-1955 in *Human Relations*: the Glacier project, the coal-mining study, and the Indian weaving sheds.

A.K. Rice (a social anthropologist) had joined The Tavistock Institute in 'early 1948, concerned with issues of the organisation and development of the Institute' (Rice, 1949, p. 195). He led and published reports on two of the three significant STS projects. Internal documents indicate that both Trist's group and Rice's group played significant roles in the development of STS thinking.

By 1962, however, Rice and Trist were in a conflict that colleagues tended to characterise as a personality and power struggle. The resulting organisational split led to the creation of two units: one on 'applied social research', directed by Rice that also included Miller; another on 'human resources' directed by Trist that also included Emery. While agreeing there was a split, Bridger disagrees that it was a 'simple power struggle' (Bridger, 1997, personal communication).

Eric Miller sees the situation differently:

> Although the split did become personalised it rested on a difference over strategy. In 1960, income dipped; Rice was concerned about getting enough money to pay salaries while Trist wanted to invest in long-term ventures with US associates: the pragmatic versus the visionary, with a sub-plot of psychoanalysis versus social psychology: Trist was enormously influenced by Emery, who was fiercely anti-analysis. (Miller, 1997, personal communication)

Despite their differences in how to manage the Institute, Trist and Rice both gave credit to Lewin as influential in their thinking. Trist's statements in this regard appear in the volumes of collected articles he has published (e.g. Trist & Murray, 1990). It is necessary to dig deeper for connections with Rice's work.

Much of A.K. Rice's early research used topological mapping as an analytical tool. He credits Lewin with the notions of 'boundaries' and 'regions', which are central to socio-technical systems. From one of Rice's notes an explicit link between Lewin's ideas and socio-technical systems can be acknowledged:

> The diagram … and all subsequent diagrams of management organisations, are based on Lewin's topological notations. These diagrams permit representation of the positions, inside and outside regions, and the relations between parts and wholes, but do not presuppose any quantitative determination of size. I prefer them to more orthodox management charts, whatever conventions followed, because topological diagrams delineate boundaries rather than lines of communication or hierarchical authority'. (Rice, 1963, p. 21n)

Miller believes that 'there was little or no influence of Lewin in the original socio-technical concept (Trist & Bamforth, etc., and Rice's weaving experiments)', but agrees that Lewin 'was an influence when Rice moved to the level of organisational design' (Miller, 1997, personal communication). Evidence that Trist used topological diagrams, per se, has not been found. Perhaps by the time he was engaged with socio-technical theory, he no longer used the method.

For others at the Institute, topological psychology – or at least the process of mapping – came to be a transitional object during the early years. For those who were originally psychiatrists or psychoanalysts, the conceptual language and illustrative diagrams helped them make a transition from looking exclusively or even primarily at individual intra-psychic forces, to taking seriously the study of social forces in that individual's environment. For those who came from social anthropology or sociology, topological mapping helped them work from social facts back down a level of analysis or two into the individual's inner world. Miller & Rice seem to be teaching themselves, as well as others when they write, 'the ego is the equivalent of the boundary control region that mediates between the inner world and the environment' (Miller & Rice, 1967, p. 16).

Field theorists have described topology as 'a very productive metaphor' with 'terms that were useful in everyday language': 'boundary,' 'direction,' 'steps,' 'barrier' or 'force' (Back, 1992, p. 55). Indeed, Institute staff used topological diagrams as a method of diagnosis and illustration. Early internal documents record the extent to which they found these diagrams helpful. Phil Herbst, however, seems to have been the only Institute staff member determined to use topology along with mathematics (see Herbst, 1962, 1970, 1974). The extensive internal use of mapping was not publicly

apparent until 1951 when diagrams appeared in *Human Relations* and then only a half-dozen such articles were published until 1955.

The late 1960s began a painful period of growth and development for The Tavistock Institute. The new unit structure was a success: two units had been added (operations research and marital studies) and each of the four now contained a dozen staff. The Clinic and the Institute moved together from Tavistock Square to a new building in South Hampstead. Debates were underway about the likelihood of the diverging interests being able to be accommodated under one Institute identity. In 1967, Trist left to take up the first of several posts he was to hold at USA universities. In 1969, both Rice and Jessop (the director of the operations research unit) died unexpectedly, and Emery returned to Australia. A new Conservative government in the United Kingdom meant that institutional links to government-sponsored research were in question.

For Bridger, this difficult period was characterised by the loss of a policy that, for the initial decade, required professional members of the Institute to have individual psycho-analytic psychotherapy. He wondered:

> What would happen when some would qualify for training and become psychoanalysts?! Certainly, one would expect and welcome change over time, and radical change indeed, in view of a professional membership engaged in keeping at the forefront ... As membership grew however, without that necessity for analysis, and included more competencies (e.g. operations research, etc.) wider and more diverse themes evolved. (Bridger, 1997, personal communication)

1970-1989: implicit institutionalisation of Lewinian ideas

The start of The Tavistock Institute's third decade was difficult, but not impossible. The founders had shared a common point in history with those who were developing social psychology in the USA. Deutsch speaks of Lewinian psychology as 'a vehicle for integrating ... Einstein's way of theorising, Freud's emphasis on psychological dynamics, and Marx's emphasis on social influences upon psychological processes' (Deutsch, 1992, p. 34). Indeed, the Institute's shared culture by 1970 was strong enough to survive the tremendous losses of 1967-69. By 1975 there was a new structure of participative management in place, alongside several autonomous working units. However, the environment of the organisation was also changing.

The Tavistock Institute had benefited, like Lewin and his followers, from being the 'first kids on the block'. As Deutsch expresses this advantage, 'apart from whatever other merits we had, we were influential because we were lucky enough to be active early in the development of modern social psychology when there were relatively few others who were doing research and publishing in this field' (Deutsch, 1992, p. 40).

Similarly, in the United Kingdom by the mid-1970s, the competition for research and consulting projects was beginning to increase.

An amazing variety and number of action research projects were undertaken during the 1970s and 1980s. The application of social science to industrial problems and challenges continued with work in hospitals, prisons, shipping, manufacturing, government departments, hotels and catering, and construction. Staff worked in Canada and Ireland, as well as in the United Kingdom. They helped create a practitioner-oriented STS method that could be disseminated internationally. Similarly, the group relations model was expanded and applied to management, organisations, and community development, including conflict resolution.

More social policy research came the Institute's way:

- issues of provision of services for the disabled;
- implementation of town planning and investment strategies;
- labour force planning and deployment in the health service;
- rural economic and community development;
- training for work and the unemployed;
- national infrastructures for utilities;
- distance working and the implications for work design of new technologies.

As the 1970s began, there was still an atmosphere of interest and commitment to industrial democracy; as the 1980s progressed, work in this area became less explicit and less funded. Throughout this period, however, Institute scientists do not normally mention Lewin directly. With the notable exception of Frank Heller, a social psychologist who joined the Institute in late 1969, reference to Lewin is rarely explicit during 1970-80.

Nonetheless, the principles of a Lewinian philosophy of science had been assimilated into an overall 'house style'. Using Gold's summary of Lewinian 'rules to be followed for building good theory' (Gold, 1992, p. 69), it is possible to demonstrate a movement from the 'relatedness' to Lewin in the early years, to an institutionalisation of most of these rules. The '2T' numbers below refer to internal documents from The Tavistock Institute archives:

- The 'constructive method' rule encourages researchers 'to create concepts, however intangible, that seem necessary for explanation' (Gold, 1992, p. 69). During the 1970s and 1980s, scientific staff aimed for a useful conceptualisation of the problem or challenge facing their client system. For example, John Friend introduces concepts of 'inter-organisational linkages' to help his town planning clients to begin to work with the challenges of 'planning in a multi-organisational context' (2T294).
- The 'dynamic approach' rule 'means that the elements of any situation should be regarded as parts of a system' (Gold, 1992, p. 70). During this period, Institute reports to clients begin by describing the broad picture of group, inter-group, organisational and inter-organisational relationships that relate to the issue under consideration. For example,

Gordon Lawrence and Eric Miller address societal forces, as well as individual psychological forces in looking at the 'psychic and political constraints on the growth of industrial democracy' (2T339).

- The rule that characterises Lewinian science as a field theory – 'analysis starts with the situation as a whole' – requires researchers to keep in mind 'multiple causal conditions' and 'interaction affects among casual elements' (Gold, 1992, p. 70). In the 1970s and 1980s, qualitative research methodologies become apparent in the Institute's research. Statistics appear less frequently than in the earlier decades. Qualitative methods were more amenable to studying 'the whole', particularly relationships between social and psychological factors. For example, Don Bryant and Jean Neumann use 'causal maps' to illustrate the forces working for and against prevention of shipping casualties at sea, thus suggesting directions for interventions at the level of individuals' roles, inter-departmental, intra-organisational, inter-organisational and societal levels (2T438).
- The 'contemporaneity' rule asserts that 'only conditions in the present can explain experience and behaviour in the present' (Gold, 1992, p. 70). Institute staff repeatedly identified what, within the present situation, contributed to behaviours and attitudes held by clients. They expressed empathy and understanding with clients, and focused interventions on social factors. For example, Hugh Murray and E. Gregory address fairness in personnel procedures and selection during a project evaluating the effectiveness of policy on race relations within the Civil Service. They focus explicitly on the current situation instead of addressing history (2T65). That said, some Institute staff would insist on transference from the past being taken into consideration as operating 'in the present' – a psychoanalytic provision that cannot be credited to Lewin.
- The rule that psychological phenomena must be formalised as 'mathematical representation' did not stand up to action research. Lewin himself advocated violating this rule, 'in the foreseeable future' (Lewin, 1992, p. 70). The Tavistock Institute took this advice to heart. Some sort of illustrative techniques continued to be used during this period, but not routinely. As the incidence of government-funded applied research increased, so did survey research with some corresponding statistics. Only the operational research unit combined some form of mapping with mathematical representation. Their 'strategic choice' methodology (Friend & Hickling, 1987) can be understood as '... a refined model of Lewinian topological drawing of the different regions representing policy choices' (Back, 1992, p. 61).
- There is one Lewinian meta-theory rule that The Tavistock Institute never followed: the one that requires a 'single level of analysis', which says that 'psychological phenomena be explained by psychological conditions' (Lewin, 1992, p. 70). From the beginning – and during this era of institutionalisation – Institute researchers have always 'used objects and events outside of the individual mind in composing explanations' (Lewin,

1992, p. 70). The Institute's 'house style' has been to recognise 'the reality of social facts independent of psychological facts' and to aim 'to explain the interdependence of these two sets of facts' (Lewin, 1992, p. 72).

With the withdrawal of Trist to the USA, Institute research no longer addressed psychological facts but emphasised social facts. Indeed, Trist had moved far from that orientation by the early 1960s. However, during this period, a curious phenomenon developed.

Michael Foster (a social psychologist) had taken over the editorship of *Human Relations* in the early 1970s. In practice, Foster was actually involved in action research in organisations (notably having been on the staff of the Shell project that developed the 'STS stepwise' methodology). In his editor role, Foster tended to evaluate submitted articles as if he were Festinger, himself. With some exceptions, the journal increasingly published 'field social psychology' – social psychology in the tradition of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR), loosing the characteristic link to action research.

Indeed, two of the more prolific Institute staff during this period – Linden Hilgendorf and Barrie Irving (1976, 1978) – published annually in *Human Relations* in this tradition. This is remarkable for two reasons. First, the internal documents for clients continued to look very much like the emerging 'house style' of action research, albeit supported by some statistics. Secondly, 'field social psychology' – with its roots firmly in the American followers of Lewin – was not the tradition overtly prominent at the Institute. It appears, that at least for some staff, their application of Lewinian concepts – consciously or unconsciously – were somewhat split between their researcher identities and their practitioner identities.

Another surprise was a negative attitude towards organisational development (OD). Given the historical links between the group relations model and NTL, such a stance was curious. This period saw the Institute's first competition for large-scale projects from American management consultancy firms. Miller thinks that criticisms of American OD rested 'rightly or wrongly, on the belief that they focused on the psycho-social and ignored technology and environment' (Miller, 1997, personal communication).

Indeed, an Institute staff member published a book that openly stated this criticism (Klein, 1976). Lisl Klein had joined the Institute after leaving her internal consultancy job at Esso Petroleum. She felt that several months of hard, careful work at Esso in the mid-60s had been destroyed when Rensis Likert and his ISR colleagues arrived from Michigan. Their ideological belief in participative management and the coercion she observed as a change method, struck Klein as un-scientific and undemocratic.

During the same period, however, Bridger cooperated extensively with representatives of American organisational development. 'Over that period (and through my NTL membership), Eric Trist and I worked with Herb Shepard, Warren Bennis and many others, developing relationships and

discussions over the range of exciting developments taking place at that very time' (Bridger, 1997, personal communcation). These differing experiences demonstrate some confusion in the relatedness of second and third generation staff to their own Lewinian legacy.

1990–Present: building on tradition while creating a future

While current scientists still enact the institutionalised principles of the 1970s and 1980s, they do so in a less encouraging environment. Only a few remaining action-orientated staff consciously refer to Lewin, socio-technical systems and group relations models. To the extent that an ethos is alive institutionally, newer Institute scientists are progressively less conscious of that legacy. The one link to Kurt Lewin that they do claim, however, is through action research. Staff members joining the Institute in the 1980s were preoccupied with proving that action research remained relevant to contemporary organisational and societal challenges. Since the 1990s, funded action research projects have been insufficient to sustain the Institute's track record. Biases in favour of applied research have taken over.

During the early 1990s, only two staff members openly referred to Lewinian ideas. Frank Heller (1986, 1992, 1993), impressed by both the multi-method approach and the content of Lewinian research on leadership styles, developed a research stream in management and decision-making. His group feedback analysis technique involved subjects in data analysis in order 'to restrict excessively free interpretation by the social scientist, which always struck me as undemocratic and illegitimate' (Heller, 1997, personal communication).

Jean Neumann entered consultancy practice under the influence of action research practitioners, completing her doctorate in an organisational behaviour programme created to give NTL practitioners access to academe. After joining the Institute in 1987, she explicitly experimented with integrating systems psychodynamics with Lewinian ideas (Neumann, 1989, 1994, 1995; Neumann et al, 1995). In collaboration with Eric Miller, Neumann designed and led the 'advanced organisational consultation programme' (AOC). The AOC still exemplifies integrating applied psychoanalysis, organisational theory and organisational development methodology within an action research framework. Such a commitment has often placed the AOC at the practical and theoretical tension between progressive notions of group and organisational development, and regressive political and emotional behaviour.

Over these 15 years, the Institute has continued to offer research and consultancy across a variety of sectors: industry and commerce, education and training, social policy and health care, public management and public policy, employment and economic development. Positive contributions have been made to several practical concerns; for example:

- partnership in construction procurement;
- payment systems for group-based working;

- trans-national transferability of training;
- human factors for distance and flexible learning technologies;
- political and psychodynamics of innovative health provision;
- dynamics of privatisation;
- participation in economic development in rural communities.

Nonetheless, the competition for projects and funding has grown out-of-control. International economic competition and government legislation means that more people are being made redundant, given part-time contracts and otherwise being forced to sell their labour as consultants. Universities are required to compete for research and consultancy money. International consultancy firms increasingly sell products in the European market, intentionally targeting lucrative long-term, large-scale projects. The Institute has frequently been edged out of traditional venues for action research.

In this context, Institute staff struggled to compete for contracts in a manner that allowed them to undertake their work with integrity. It has felt easier to attract applied research projects from government agencies or short, bounded consultancy projects. In 1990, these environmental changes forced the first of two reorganisations at The Tavistock Institute.

Individual organisational consultants were removed, and units and programmes were created that concentrated on attracting government-funded social policy contracts. Under Eric Miller, the Group Relations Programme still offered educational events along with some consultancy. The Programme for Organisational Change and Technological Innovation (co-directed by Richard Holti, an industrial sociologist and Jean Neumann) combined research with consultancy. However, the Institute's Council favoured social policy research. Elliot Stern (a political scientist) created the Evaluation, Development and Review Unit (EDRU) that specialised in participatory approaches to evaluation of public policy.

By 1994, a proliferation of entry level contract staff for EDRU had out-grown the offices that the Institute had shared with the Tavistock Clinic. The Institute purchased its own six-storey Grade II listed building in East Central London. Early commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration continued to result in scientific staff being recruited from social anthropology, sociology, economics and political science. The psychology being applied, however, was increasingly more diverse: psychoanalysis, cognitive theory, social psychology and organisational psychology all co-existed. With the relocation of the Institute away from the Clinic, there was little left of the psychodynamic orientation outside the Group Relations Programme and the AOC.

One constant throughout the Institute's history, *Human Relations*, made a tentative effort to reclaim its Lewinian roots during this time. In 1990, a new editorial structure was put in place with an editorial policy that reiterated many of the original 1947 biases. The field social psychology of Foster's editorial tenure was replaced with an emphasis on British industrial sociology and occupational psychology. Action research and

qualitative methodologies were encouraged. As a result, *Human Relations* re-entered the higher ranks of the most cited journals.

The fact that staff still identified with action research was apparent when, during the Institute's fiftieth anniversary in 1997, they agreed a new logo with the tagline, 'social science in action'. While a public reaffirmation, this phrase was agreed in an atmosphere of anxiety about the degree to which action research was considered fundable. As a part of the anniversary celebrations, the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council co-sponsored a seminar with the Institute entitled, 'is action research real research?'. Meanwhile at another anniversary event, Will Hutton (a well-known British journalist and author) spoke of the ongoing relevance of action research to contemporary work and social issues.

This apparent environmental ambivalence toward action research plagued the Institute as the decade ended and the new millennium began. The strategic emphasis on government-funded social policy contracts had removed the Institute from arenas in which consultancy and action research projects were shaped. In reflecting on the 1990s, John Kelleher, current Acting Director, explained:

> We emphasised the importance of formative, ongoing evaluation, evaluation as a learning process, and learning from innovation. This wasn't sold or presented as action research, even though it had action research underlying it. Typically, the projects we got only covered the early stages of the action research cycle (data collection, analysis, modelling and feedback) ... We were pulled into the technical applied research end of the evaluation field. (Kelleher, 2004, personal communication)

Indeed, the Institute was so successful at this applied evaluation research, that it launched with Sage Publications a new journal, *Evaluation*, that has become the premier journal for those concerned with evaluation.

However, the Institute's competitive advantage for developmental evaluation research began to slip by the turn of the century. Again, universities and big consultancy firms moved into the same lucrative territory. A second period of reorganisation – between October 2001 and the summer of 2004 – resulted in the merger of all units and programmes under one Director (the first since 1947). The excesses of the earlier model, in which organisational consulting had been discredited, were corrected by encouraging a strategy that celebrated both applied research and consulting. The intention was that staff specialising in each would be assigned to action research projects that came along. However, the market for action research in the United Kingdom had split in two. In the broader context, the world wanted to buy applied research and evaluation and management business consultation. It didn't want to buy both at the same time, or to buy both at different times from the same providers: that work is looked after by different divisions of government departments and by different governmental staff. (Kelleher, 2004, personal communication).

Current research policy can favour action research approaches in which collaborative networks of client organisations work simultaneously on the same issue or method. However, the pressure for short-term results militate second or third iterations of learning. Challenges of project management and inter-group cooperation eat up tight time frames and force premature results. The 'contract culture' of these projects also tends to be anti-risk and anti-reflection. To be awarded a contract of this nature for action research can be a scientific and practical nightmare.

This situation has become intolerable scientifically, organisationally and economically. In the summer of 2004, the Council and staff at the Institute recommitted – yet again – to action research as the centre of its strategic direction. Acting Director, John Kelleher, took an active lead in this decision. He concludes that the previous strategy had a:

> tendency to pull the Institute apart. What we seemed able to sell the world divided quite sharply between applied research and organisational consulting. The basic relationship to the client was very different ... Staff competence and capability needs to be located in action research. Staff members need to be organised around action research competence; and, the Institute's profile and marketing needs to be aligned around that. (Kelleher, 2004, personal communication)

Concluding Thought

The Tavistock Institute is now three years away from the sixtieth anniversary of its founders' first explicit commitment to integrating the ideas of Kurt Lewin with the ideas of object relations and social systems theory. This latest stage of its organisational development has been one of the most difficult.

Current Council and staff have decided to take the risk of reintegrating the practice and research dimensions of their professional identity and approach. They intend to look for clients in the environment willing to have their social problems addressed with action research. However, action research by itself may not be enough.

An argument could be made that the Institute's competitive edge could again be at the integration between field theory and object relations theory. This approach to social psychology still blends well with more macro-theories of sociology and political science. The time to re-engage with the Lewinian legacy from a contemporary perspective may well be now.

Three qualities shaped the Institute's uniqueness right from the beginning. First, the Institute applied the socio-psychological perspective to shed light on complex motivations and recommend interventions that matched motivations. Secondly, cooperation across disciplinary boundaries between psychologists and sociologists increased the likelihood that interventions reliably resulted in multiple level systems change. Finally, the necessity of the Institute supporting its research work with practical

consultancy services – one way to characterise action research – resulted in theories grounded in practice. These theories generalised well into other settings. Lewin's ideas are implicated in all three of these unique qualities.

However, the real 'value added' came from how the scientific staff of The Tavistock Institute made sense of this Lewinian legacy in the face of real social problems and attempts to resolve them. What Lewin and Trist had in common in 1947 was a determination to develop a methodology that addressed contemporary problems. Certainly, such a determination is still relevant and applicable today.

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