Comment on the Preceding Article

Comparing and Developing Theories of Training

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Klein and Astrachan have provided interested researchers, practitioners, and consumers with an important comparative summary of the two theories of group training—T Group and study group.

To understand and evaluate such a comparison, it is particularly important to know the perspective of the individuals doing the comparison, as well as to specify exactly what is being compared. It would have been helpful if the authors had described their own perspective, beyond merely labeling it as a "modified Tavistock orientation." A related issue is the unclarity of the article as to precisely what is being described and analyzed. If the focus is solely on theoretical statements, then the source of such statements is unclear. The description and analysis for the most part imply that practitioners of T-Group and study group training each have a single normative theory of group training. It is not clear to what extent the "data base" of the article includes observations of actual training groups conducted with either a T-Group or study group orientation. If such observations were used, then the conditions under which they were made are not described. Finally, regardless of the role of observations in the comparison, the authors do not deal with the relation of theory to practice. It is assumed that the two theories of group training, as described, accurately reflect what is occurring in practice. This is a questionable assumption; any

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article dealing with theories of group training should certainly deal with this issue.

In describing the theory of T-Group training, the authors assume a greater degree of homogeneity than my own observations support (Crowfoot, 1971). While at one point Klein and Astrachan indicate the diversity which exists with respect to T-Group practice, they go right on with their analysis, assuming a single theory of T-Group training. For example, they generalize that the T-Group trainer acknowledges the presence of significant group dynamics but most often chooses to focus on the individual in the group. This generalization does not acknowledge the diversity of practice in T-Group training or historical developments within T-Group training on this issue (Harrison, 1967).

One problem in comparing different theories of group training is the idiosyncratic (to the theory) use of concepts. Often the concepts of one theory are not clear to individuals using a different perspective; and when the concepts of one theory are used to make comparison with other theories, only certain differences are emphasized. For example, I first found the authors' attempts to distinguish between "authority" and "leadership" to be unclear. On a rereading of their application of these concepts to the consultant and trainer roles, I found them helpful in describing the authors' perception of the differences between these roles. The relation of the concept "power" to the concepts of "authority" and "leadership" also remains unclear. This is one of many points at which a reader becomes curious as to how a practitioner or theoretician heavily involved in T-Group training would proceed to compare the two approaches, and in particular, the role of the consultant with that of the trainer. From my observations, an important distinction between the consultant and trainer roles involves the bases of power used. The consultant relies primarily on legitimate, and to a lesser degree on expert, power, while the trainer is more reliant on referent and expert power (Crowfoot, 1971). This description represents a different approach to this aspect of comparison from that taken by Klein and Astrachan.

The authors discuss the theories of T-Group and study

group training as if T Groups and study groups do not occur in the context of closely related events. In general, T Groups occur in the context of a laboratory which consists of activities besides T Groups, and study groups occur in the context of conferences which include activities in addition to the study groups. If one is interested in what a participant learns from the T Group or study group, it is necessary to focus on the theory of laboratory and conference training as well as on what actually occurs in both types of small group (Crowfoot, 1971). This broader focus, in the case of Tavistock conferences, for example, requires that attention be paid to the conference's integration of the sociotechnical perspective on social organization and a psychoanalytic perspective on the individual and the group (Miller & Rice, 1967). Doing this helps to elucidate the consultant role by locating it in the larger social system of which it is a part and by allowing subtleties and inconsistencies in this role related to its social context thus to be identified. Taking the laboratory or conference as the focus of analysis results in a more complex and less clear descriptive analysis of the theoretical perspectives used in implementing these two types of training. But such a focus is important if future theoretical work is to be maximally related to the experience of participants in these educational systems.

It was heartening to find Klein and Astrachan's acknowledging that "to adequately understand any theory of human behavior one needs to know something of the sociohistorical context in which it developed." However, their treatment of the sociohistorical contexts of the two types of training was quite brief and left some important questions unanswered. What are the value biases of the two theories? Any theory of human behavior has its value biases. The authors did refer to value differences between the two theories with regard to the changeability of individuals, but beyond this left many value-related questions unanswered.

These unanswered questions are important for several reasons. To be clear about the appropriateness of different types of training and their attendant theories for a given situation and population demands clarity with regard to the value assumptions of the theory. Knowing the assumptions

they rest on is important in developing and refining the theories. Klein and Astrachan call attention to the fact that the theoretical analysis of behavior in training groups has not kept pace with practice, and at the same time take the position that time and energy should be used to develop a synthesis of T-Group and study group theory. I take this to mean that there are some value assumptions common to these two theories that make such a synthesis appropriate—and that the authors are satisfied with these assumptions. In making this conclusion, I recognize that social science is only now beginning to emerge from the long-held mythology of the value-free character of its inquiry. Raising and answering questions concerning value assumptions and expecting clarity on these matters do not at present have the same status as do parallel behaviors concerning methodological clarity. My own thoughts concerning the issue of the value assumptions of these two theories of group training are far from complete, I might add.

One value commonality of these two approaches can be seen by placing them in the context of a theoretical understanding of power. Gamson (1968) distinguishes between two perspectives on the power relationship (i.e., the relationship between "authorities and potential partisans"). The perspective on this relationship from the vantage point of the authorities is termed the "social control perspective." This perspective emphasizes those processes by which collective goals are achieved, the legitimacy of the authorities is maintained, and compliance with their decisions is attained. A second perspective on the power relationship is the influence perspective. Here the focus of attention is on the clash of competing interests, the existence of discontent, the mobilization of resources for political support, and the achievement of structural change. This perspective focuses on the power of actors in the system and not on the maintenance of the system as a whole.

Both T-Group and study group theory are based on a social control perspective. This can be illustrated with regard to conflict. T-Group training focuses on resolving conflict through arriving at a consensus about collective goals and achieving them through rational problem-solving behavior.

The focus on conflict in the study group occurs within an unalterable authority structure. The study of conflict in the study group takes the form of coming to understand the potential partisans' and authorities' projective distortions and their antecedents, as well as consequences, in this given structure. Both forms of training (and their attendant theories) fail to focus on processes of changing power relations in a social system and on developing an altered system—openly acknowledged and legitimized—in which power and authority are more widely distributed. One outcome for the learner, given the social control perspective shared by these two forms of training, is that social system oppression is not looked at from the perspective of the distribution of power and authority and the concomitant internalizations that occur through socialization processes. Rather, oppression is looked at in terms of suppressed intrapsychic impulses—not their social systemic sources. Or, it may be viewed in terms of particular styles of the exercise of, and response to, authority—not the systemic distribution and legitimation of such authority.

As social change and conflict are increasingly focused on, and we come to have a clear picture of heretofore hidden structural and cultural assumptions, our theory and practice of training must be responsive. We need to question some dearly (and sometimes blindly) held assumptions and practices, as well as to explore new forms experimentally. The type of descriptive, comparative analysis of different approaches to training provided by Klein and Astrachan is a contribution in this direction.

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