Research into Learning at the Leicester Conference

Dione Hills*

Abstract

This article describes a research project that was undertaken alongside the 2012 Leicester conference group relations event. The aim was to explore a number of questions about learning derived from the conference, and in particular, how different aspects of the conference contributed to learning. It also explored the challenges inherent in undertaking research into a group relations activity. In relation to the first of these tasks, the results indicated that the learning was highly valued by participants, particularly in terms of increasing their understanding of group dynamics, and in feeling more at ease and able to cope in complex, ambiguous, and emotionally charged situations, with different aspects of the conference contributing differently to this learning. In terms of the second task, the research demonstrated that, when undertaken with care, a great deal of useful qualitative and quantitative data can be derived, without overly influencing the event itself.

Key words: group relations, research, programme evaluation, group relations conference learning, participant observation.

INTRODUCTION

A great deal has been written over the years about the theory and practice of group relations. However, this has not been matched by a similar level of research and evaluation. Some research has been undertaken, as described by Wallach (2014) in her review of the field, but she also notes the early concern from A. K. Rice that undertaking research at conferences might interfere with the "here and now" experience of these events (Wallach, 2014, p. 2). She does, however, also voice surprise at the absence of research given the central role of the Tavistock Institute, a social science research organisation, in the development and promotion of group relations activities.

It was partly to address this absence, and to explore the dynamics surrounding the task of undertaking a research in this context, that a research project was undertaken alongside the Leicester conference in

*Address for correspondence: E-mail: d.hills@tavinstitute.org

2012. A two-week long, residential, group relations event, this confer-
ence has taken place annually since 1959. There have been plans to
undertake research into the conference, as Eric Miller notes in his 1989
paper describing the history of the conference.

> Twenty years ago Rice and I devised a complex methodology for evaluation
> (Rice, 1965). … For the first phase we proposed a "before-and-after" set of
> in-depth clinical interviews combined with assessments by colleagues in
> members' working-settings. It was a costly scheme, and we were never able
> to secure funding for it. We therefore remain reliant on impressionistic and
> anecdotal evidence, from past members, from people who know them, and
> from our own observations. (Miller, 1989, p. 20)

Since then, the only attempt to undertake research into the conference
was a small scale study in 2002, in which participants were inter-
viewed, post conference, to explore how they had heard about the con-
ference and their reasons for attending (Solvik, 2002).

The challenges of researching the conference are considerable. One
of these, as Miller notes, is the pedagogic style of the conference and
the kind of learning generated:

> "Group Relations Training" is a misnomer. "Training" implies transmission
> of skills, acquisition of which should, potentially at least, be measurable.
> The Conference provides a set of experiences, but also explicitly states that
> authority for making use of the experiences and learning from them rests
> firmly with the individual member. Outcomes are therefore idiosyncratic
> and unpredictable. (Miller, 1989, p. 20)

Another challenge is the emotional nature of the work. One descrip-
tion of the Leicester conference describes this as "a contained transi-
tional space which allows members to get in touch with difficult
feelings and emotions" (Brunner et al., 2006, p. 45). Participants can
find it difficult to put their learning into words, and many report still
integrating the experience, months, or even years, later.

The learning may also be deeply personal, as participants adopt a
"constructively analytical and critical approach to the way they per-
form their roles in the groups to which they belong" (Trist & Sofer,
1959, p. 6). Although they are learning about the dynamics of groups
and organisations, the focus is less on theorising about these, and
more on having "opportunities to learn about their own involvement
in these dynamics" (Miller, 1989, p. 9).

At a most basic level, Miller notes, participants learn to identify
and label unfamiliar phenomena that are encountered. At another
level, they find new ways of classifying the world, particularly notic-
ing "phenomena previously unnoticed or dismissed as irrelevant".

However, at a deeper level, which Miller equates to Bateson's (1973) "level III" learning, there may be "some degree of personality re-structuring—a systemic change" leading some participants, "to make significant changes in their work and personal life: for example, a career move, a job change, a change of partner".

Alongside having to find a suitable approach to explore learning of a complex nature (and finding the resources to do this), researchers have to address the concern, noted by both Trist (quoted by Wallace) and Miller, that the research may disrupt the dynamics of the conference itself.

In 2012 the time appeared to be ripe for some deeper exploration of these issues. This was a time of growing interest in "cross fertilisation" between different streams of work within the Tavistock Institute, especially between its group relations and evaluation activities. It was hoped that undertaking a small study could generate both a useful account of the conference, and explore the challenges of evaluating experiential learning events of these kind. This idea appealed both to the two directors of the event and two researchers from the Institute's evaluation team, both of whom had some experience of group relations activities. The study was funded partly from the budget of the conference itself, and partly from the time of the two researchers.

Research methodology

Carried out in the spirit of participatory evaluation, work began with consulting the directors and staff of the conference about what questions the research should address. There was interest in having a relatively straightforward account of the conference for a non-specialist audience and three questions were identified:

- What key learning and insights were generated by the Leicester conference 2012?
- Which aspects or elements of the conference contributed most to this learning?
- How do participants make use of this learning on their return to their "back home" work?

Three sets of data were used to answers these questions.

- *Participant observation*: the researchers spent two days at the conference attending two plenary events and a staff meeting.
- *Interviews*: during their time at the conference, the researchers sat in the dining area during breaks, inviting participants and staff to be interviewed. A short topic guide was used, and notes taken (rather than interviews being recorded).

- *Online surveys*: these were sent by email to staff and participants, before and immediately after the conference, and to participants only, 9 months later.

Participants were informed by letter about the research prior to the conference, making it clear that their participation in the research was entirely voluntary. In the event, 49 interviews were conducted, representing 76% of all participants and staff (some were interviewed twice). The response rate for the first questionnaire (pre conference) was good (86%), but less good for the post (64%) and 9 month follow-up (18%) surveys.

The rest of this paper provides a description of the conference and its participants, an overview of the findings related to the three research questions identified and reflections on the research experience. Quotes from questionnaires and interviews are used to illustrate the themes emerging from the data. The final section is a discussion of these findings, together with reflections on learning for further research of this kind.

THE CONFERENCE AND ITS PARTICIPANTS

In 2012, the title of the conference was "Authority, role, organization: coalition, cooperation and sustainable society" and the primary task was described as:

> To study the exercise of authority in the taking up of roles through the inter-personal, inter-group and institutional relations that develops within the conference as an organisation within its wider context.

Taking place shortly after a coalition government had been set up in the UK, the theme was reflected in the appointment, for the first time, of two conference directors (a man and a woman). However, most participants reported that it was the conference itself, rather than its title and theme that encouraged them to attend.

Participants and staff

The conference attracts participants and staff from across the world, and in 2012 the majority (74%) of the 44 participants, and 6 of the 10 staff members came from outside the UK. Non UK participants came primarily from Europe, and several of the non UK staff came from further afield (USA, India, and Peru).

The majority of participants were mid to late career (between the ages of 40 and 60). Many worked in the fields of health or social work,

but many other occupations were also mentioned including interna-
tional development, law, finance, police, engineering, research, IT/
software development, marketing, and faith leadership. Most (60%)
participants funded their own participation, sometimes (27%) assisted
by a bursary: only 15 reporting that the conference fees were being
fully covered by their employers.

Reasons for attending the conference

The primary reason given for attending the conference was a desire to
learn more about group and organisational behaviour. The initial ques-
tionnaire asked participants to rate a number of statements drawn
from interviews with participants in earlier Leicester conferences, in
terms of their relevance to their own motivation on a scale of 1 to 10
(1 being least and 10 being most relevant to themselves) (Figure 1).

   While some reasons mentioned were quite personal (i.e., to explore
heir own roles and relationship in groups) others were more concep-
tual: wishing to learning about group and organisational behaviour.
Many participants rated both as being of interest. A key motivation for
those who had attended groups relations events before (22), was to
have a more in-depth experience of this kind of work. Those without
previous group relations experience were often less specific about
their reasons for attending, with several noting their decision being
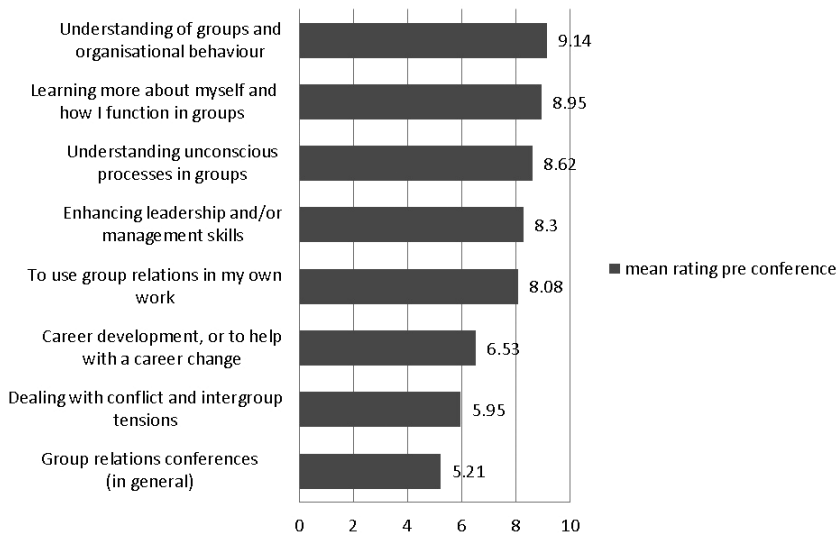based on the recommendation of a friend or colleague:

Figure 1.   Mean rating of relevance of different aspects of the conference.

- Never done anything like this before—my friend just said "go" and wasn't any more precise—now I know why! (pre conference questionnaire).
- I saw the brochure and had a gut feeling (pre conference questionnaire).

Many observed that they were not entirely sure what learning outcomes to expect, and several anticipating that these might be different to what they *were* expecting. This uncertainty was summed up by one staff member:

- Usually you learn things you don't expect—plus it's difficult to quantify the value of the learning in that it becomes intrinsic so you don't necessarily notice it. The learning percolates through you during and after the conference, often you can't hold on to it to quantify it (pre conference questionnaire).

FINDINGS RELATED TO LEARNING AND INSIGHTS GENERATED BY THE CONFERENCE

We took two approaches to identifying learning. Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with quotes about learning from participants in earlier conferences, and also given space to describe their experience and learning in their own words using open ended questions. A thematic analysis was undertaken of the qualitative data.

The overall rating of learning from the conference in post conference questionnaires was high, with a large majority (93%) of those returning these questionnaires rating these as 4 or 5 out of 5 (Figure 2).

Although rating their learning highly, participants often found it hard to put into words what this learning was. Some of the comments echoed the idea of transformative or level III learning quoted earlier from Miller (1989):
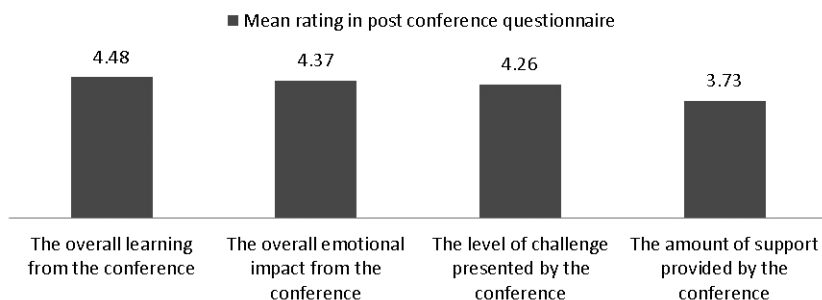
■ Mean rating in post conference questionnaire

Figure 2. Mean rating of different aspects of learning and impact in post conference survey.

- I do know that it is the most valuable professional experience and a most deeply significant life experience, and I feel certain that many things will change for me as a consequence. I just don't know how yet (post conference questionnaire).
- The conference has been very helpful for me, it has been very rich on many levels—personal, interpersonal, intergroup and I am still digesting the experience (post conference questionnaire).

Even nine months after the conference, one of the participants noted:

- The conference is absolutely a life enriching, weird, and challenging experience I will never forget. It is hard to say what lessons I exactly have integrated in my behaviour and thoughts. It definitely has deepened my understanding of how individuals behave in (sub)groups and of groups as hierarchical social systems (follow up questionnaire).

Nevertheless, some specific areas of learning were reported. One was that of now having a better experiential appreciation of group behaviour, previously understood only at a conceptual level.

- The topics of competition, diversity, envy, etc., took on completely new meanings in my understanding of group processes (post conference questionnaire).
- Confirmation and practice of theoretical knowledge that I´ve got in the literature (post conference questionnaire).
- Realizing (insights, emotional) of previous known (cognitively) issues (post conference questionnaire).

Recognising the emotional nature of the conference, we asked participants to rate the emotional impact and level of challenge they had experienced, in a similar way to other aspects of learning. Over half (52%) rated the emotional impact as high (5 out of 5) with the level of challenge given a similarly high rating. Asked, midway through the conference "How have you found the conference so far?" many replied using words like challenging, difficult, tough, painful, troubling, confusing, and disturbing. However, positive words were also used, such as interesting, exciting, enriching, empowering, and liberating.

   The openly emotional quality of the conference was reported to be both difficult *and* liberating, and as encouraging honesty, a sense of being more truly "oneself", and creativity.

- The conference gave me the freedom to explore aspects of both myself and the groups I was in. I have come to realise the destructiveness of aggression but also the freedom to play (follow up questionnaire).

- I didn't expect it to build up so fast, the group is still developing, but the atmosphere is good, I feel safe to explore and have confidence in myself (interview).
- Have been exploring creativity—being innovative, allowed to explore—that it's ok to be creative—to think outside the box—when I feel incompetent (interview).

Several described having gained a greater ease in expressing their own, or working with others', feelings.

- I was surprised how physically affected by other members' emotions and physical states I was, but (I) developed skills in managing the physical impact the group energies were having. Also I learned to differentiate more clearly between my own and others emotional and physical states (interview).
- Learned the value in not trying to over intellectualise what is going on with the voice plus thoughts plus feelings. Be more specific about desires (interview).

Which aspects of learning were important?

The open ended approach to learning, and often unanticipated learning outcomes, is reflected to some extent in changes (albeit not significant) in how different aspects of learning were rated in pre and post conference questionnaires (see Figure 3).
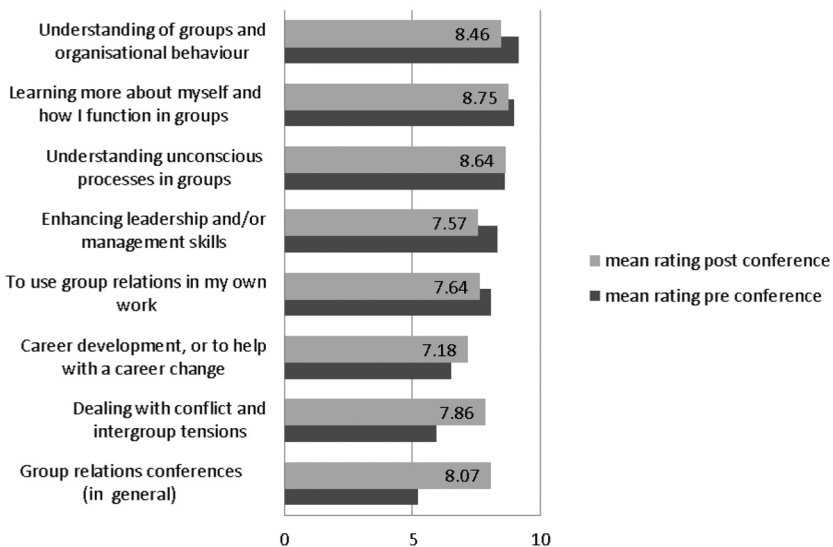

Figure 3.   Mean rating of relevance of different areas of learning pre and post conference.

Post conference, there appears to have been a shift towards interest in specific aspects of group behaviour (such as how to deal with conflict and intergroup tensions), in group relations more generally, and in how the conference would contribute to their own work and career development. The last of these may well relate to the fact that they were completing the post conference questionnaire after they returned to work.

Some issues still remained relevant, with "Understanding groups and organisational behaviour" still rated highly in terms of learning outcomes by 75% of questionnaire respondents. This was also regularly written about in response to open ended questions.

- Understanding of how people behave in groups, understanding inertia which can be created by having a lack of structure (post conference questionnaire).
- Learned that groups do have a creative energy, I've not had the experience of this before—this was the most positive aspect (post conference questionnaire).

Gaining an understanding of unconscious aspects of group behaviour was still of interest:

- Being more aware of the unconscious processes, i.e., scapegoating (post conference questionnaire).
- Projections towards other members and management helped her understand some current issues in her own organisation and how people work through anxiety (interview).

Given the title of the conference, the frequent use of terms like role and authority in survey and interview responses can be seen as one indication of the impact of the conference:

- She feels that the conference has given her the opportunity to take up roles of authority in different ways (interview).
- Feels that the delivery of knowledge or thought can be patronising if not delivered with care rather than authority (interview).
- Every contribution can lead on to something else. Authority, responsibility of doing something and also doing nothing that has an impact on the group (interview).

WHICH ASPECTS OF THE CONFERENCE CONTRIBUTE MOST TO THIS LEARNING?

Several staff, prior to the conference, had been interested in knowing how different aspects of the conference design contributed to learning, although this was something rejected in Miller and Trist's previous

plans for research because of the "synergistic nature" of the conference. Since then, several researchers have explored how various dimensions of group relations events, such as their length and location, have contributed to learning outcomes. In one example, Klein et al (1989) compared 13 different group relations conferences of different length and intensity, with different kinds of sponsorship and level of social and authority ties between staff and participants. As the present study was only looking at one conference, we focused on three aspects: its overall design and delivery, the contribution of different events, and the pedagogic approach adopted (including the role of the staff in supporting learning).

It was often the interaction between these different elements of the conference that participants noted as making the experience so powerful:

- Main strength is the pressure cooker of two weeks residential with this balanced variety of methods. Unique! (post conference questionnaire).
- All these were working very well together. Every aspect of the conference was linking well with the others to construct a whole environment in which learning can take place (post conference questionnaire).

Nevertheless, some useful insights did come from asking participants to comment on each element separately.

Design and delivery of the conference

Klein et al.'s (1989) research concluded that the length and intensity of a conference was one of the most significant features in terms of overall ratings of learning. Similarly, the participants in the Leicester conference also rated the length (14 days) of the conference and the fact that it was residential as the most important elements in its design (see Figure 4).

These two elements were often seen as working together in creating an intense and immersive experience:

- The length and the fact that it was residential provided an opportunity to be fully removed from outside distractions and to immerse fully and learn along the way (post conference questionnaire).
- It seemed vital that the conference be residential, particularly sharing meals together as it opened up numerous pathways to discover more about oneself and the other members, sometimes in quite painful ways (post conference questionnaire).
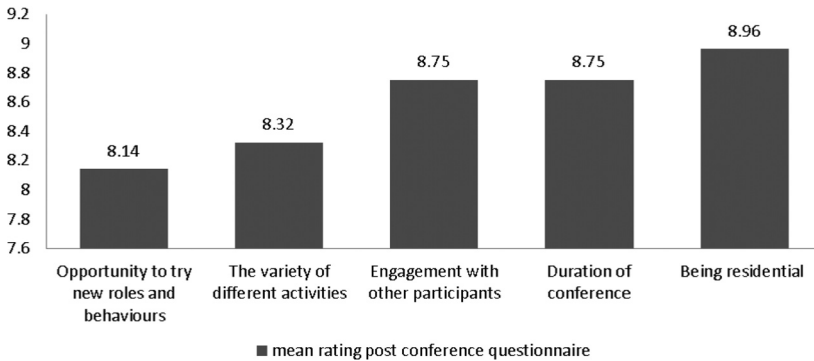
Figure 4.   Mean ratings of the contribution of different aspects of conference design to learning.

- The duration of the conference contributed in the way that it gave the opportunity to get even closer together as a group and by that learn more of group relations over time. At the same time the mental pressure were even higher due to the duration of two weeks, and the feelings by attending thus clearer (post conference questionnaire).

The length of the residential conference also put a strong focus on the quality of the accommodation and catering. These were aspects of the conference about which considerable dissatisfaction was expressed. The student accommodation in which many were sleeping was felt to be poorly maintained or heated to an unsatisfactory level (this has now been rectified!) and the food was described by a few people as being boring and unimaginative.

The contribution of different events

The conference was divided up into a number of different events, some of which have been part of the conference for many years. Others events were recent additions.

Regular events:
- *Conference Plenaries* providing opportunities to reflect on the processes of joining, being a member, and leaving the conference.
- *Large Study Groups* providing opportunities to study the experience of taking up roles in a large group setting.
- *Small Study Groups* providing an opportunity to study the shifting patterns of relations in a smaller group in the "here and now".

- *Review and Application Groups* enabling participants to review and reflect on their experience and relate this to the roles they will be resuming in their professional, organisational and personal lives.

Recent additions:
- *A Design Event* in which members explored with staff how influence is part of taking up a role in co-designing the conference structure and the emerging inter-group relationships.
- *A Sustainable Society Event* providing "opportunities to study and experience the relationships and relatedness between the membership and the staff in this temporary conference institution as a fractal of our global society".
- A daily *Yoga Event* providing "opportunities to practice mindfulness and integrate the psychical–physical–spiritual through non-doing combined with directed energy.

All events were similarly (highly) rated in terms of their contribution to learning, and several people made the point that untangling learning from one type of event or another was difficult, if not impossible (see Figure 5).

Although the variation between mean ratings between different events was not significant, this, combined with participants' comments, did provide an interesting perspective on the insights and understandings generated by different kinds of activity.

Smaller events (review and application groups, and small study groups) were generally reported as contributing to personal learning, enabling participants to gain insights into how they functioned in a group situation.

- The small study group helped me find my desires and take off the roles I have been wearing as a shield. This was deeply emotional and difficult work and I felt a connection between my mind and body. A switch has come on which can't be turned off (post conference questionnaire).
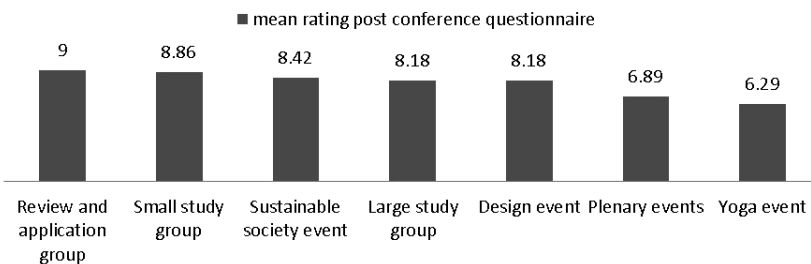

Figure 5.   Mean rating of different events to overall learning.

- The Review and Application Groups provided some very powerful experiences in terms of reflecting on my own experience, getting feedback from others, and feedback and tools from the consultant (post conference questionnaire).
- Hearing others reflect on the impact of my presence was a remarkable experience (post conference questionnaire).

Large study groups and the plenaries (fewer in number and rated less highly than other large group activities) were also an opportunity to explore personal responses to group situations:

- It was here that I finally began to see just how much I assume other people share my experiences and outlook and the extent to which this limits me and others. I also began to reflect on my own silence and the impact on others (post conference questionnaire).
- It was difficult to identify my role and influence in large groups, but over the conference I warmed to the LSG and found more possibilities for participation (post conference questionnaire).

However, the large group events were also reported as being particularly helpful for learning about group dynamics in more general terms.

- Plenary events: I hate them, but these more cognitive reflective sessions anchor my learning (post conference questionnaire).
- I think I was able to experience and observe some amazing psychoanalytical concepts in the large study group, such as primary envy or attacks on the parental couple and others and this has been experiential more than theoretical understanding for me (post conference questionnaire).

The newer conference elements, the design and sustainable society events, were similarly rated in terms of general learning about group dynamics. Several people also reported finding them challenging, complex, and confusing, but also valued these as an opportunity to learn about leadership, competition, and taking up authority in a relatively unstructured setting:

- The Design and Sustainable Society events provided a huge amount of learning with regard to group behaviours that were familiar from, and transferable to, work situations. I also learned a great deal about my own behaviour in groups, how I am perceived and also how my behaviour impacts on others (post conference questionnaire).
- The DE and SSE provided me with enormous scope to explore and practice, particularly having had the experience of working in these events in the conference the year before. I had a better

understanding of the purpose and was able to avoid some traps I'd fallen into the year before, such as getting frustrated with the process, and focus more on the experience (post conference questionnaire).

The yoga event had the lowest mean rating in terms of learning, largely because views about this were quite divided. Some participants just "didn't get the point" of why this was part of the conference, or saw it as an "exercise and relaxation" session or a break from other events.

- Yoga: important way of active relaxing during the day, but what I learned? Yes, that soft stretching really has beneficial impact (post conference questionnaire).
- Was a bit puzzled at first—then I found it useful—I can't relax generally, so the exercise helps my spine (post conference questionnaire).

However, others did appreciate the inclusion of a more body orientated approach to learning and saw this as contributing both to learning about themselves and supporting the learning experience overall.

- The yoga group was a powerful space where integration of the variety of experiences could be felt and understood through the sensations in one's body (post conference questionnaire).
- Yoga allows you to connect to self and others through working in the here and now and yoga allows you to stay in the present (interview).

One staff member felt that the linking of learning to experience in the body was at the heart of ambivalence about this event, while several others felt that ambivalence emerging elsewhere in the conference had been projected onto this activity.

- There is a palpable terror of embodied experience—members absent from sessions. Treating it as optional—saying it is either too easy or too hard, or boring. But it is about staying in the here and now—a powerful learning (interview with staff member).
- "Our feelings being unwanted were projected towards the yoga"— helpful if it is recognised. Feeling that yoga was holding the insecurity (interview with staff member).

Pedagogic approach and the role of staff

The learning approach used in the Leicester conference draws on the general principles and theory of Group Relations field. This was

described in the conference brochure as providing experiential events "in which participants and conference staff work together to critically examine different models of organisational functioning and appraise their leadership performance".

With responsibility for learning lying with the participants, a central role for staff is one of creating an environment within which this learning can take place. Part of this is creating a clear boundary and sense of containment for the learning. This involves, amongst other things, staff entering and leaving the room on time, and starting each new activity with a description of its task. Rather than taking up explicit teaching roles, presenting information or responding to questions, staff offer observations about the processes taking place, sometimes accompanied by a hypothesis about the meaning of these, or making a link between these and wider social dynamics.

The lack of explicit "teaching" can be found confusing by participants new to the group relations. However, this behaviour was also reported to be a powerful source of learning, with verbal contributions receiving mean rating of 8 out of 9 and non verbal contributions a mean rating of 7.5 out of 9.

- Non verbal actions were very very powerful—the silence at the beginning of the conference experience spoke volumes and immediately challenged all my assumptions about just about everything! It opened the door (post conference questionnaire).
- The non verbal interventions were especially in the start very shocking for me as a new conference member, and that made me reflect a lot about my own role as a consultant and preferred behaviour (post conference questionnaire).

Verbal contributions could also, sometimes, be found disconcerting or take a little while to digest and comprehend.

- I really didn't get all the verbal interventions by the staff, especially in the large study group (post conference questionnaire).
- Consultant verbal—varied, some very helpful, some disconcerting; better in the second half (post conference questionnaire).
- Most of the time I think I understood the consultants' interventions and this has been significant learning for me (post conference questionnaire).

Taking up their own authority—and responsibility—for learning could also be experienced as challenging, and several people felt that greater "support" could have been available. As can be seen in Figure 2, the level of learning support provided was rated rather lower than other elements, although the mean rating on this was still towards the

upper end of the range (3.73) with over half (52%) rating this as either 4 or 5.

Several participants yearned for more specific teaching content:

- I would have wished to have more background information, for example, a lecture: group dynamics, techniques to work with the unconscious, and techniques for communication (verbal non verbal) especially to what are related to the unconscious.
- I felt a need for some guidance on what was expected of the individuals when working in especially small Study Groups.

A few people also questioned whether more support should have been available for those experiencing strong emotional reactions.

- I'm surprised that no more help was offered for the participants related to personal emotional breakdowns. Not that everybody should have personal therapy, but for some people it was really tough to be confronted with old experiences in the setting, and I kind of have the feeling that more repairing could have been offered (post conference questionnaire).

However, having to turn to their own inner resources to make sense of their experience is part of the overall conference design, as was noted by several of the conference staff.

- I think there was a lot of support for the learning although members always expect more. Part of the support for the learning is the relative lack of support that throws people back on their own resources and resourcefulness (post conference questionnaire).
- Support is mainly provided by the design which is a holding, containing structure. At times during some events, the design was not clear and that probably weakened the elements of "support". There was much challenge—and that of course is an ingredient of group relations conferences (post conference questionnaire).

HOW PARTICIPANTS MAKE USE OF THIS LEARNING ON THEIR RETURN TO THEIR "BACK HOME" WORK

Two weeks after the conference

It was noted earlier that some participants had little to say in their pre conference questionnaire about how learning from the conference would relate to their work lives. However, by the time they completed the second questionnaire, two weeks after the conference ended, two-thirds (68%) were now reporting it had being of relevance to their work situation (compared to 22% at the outset) (see Figure 6).
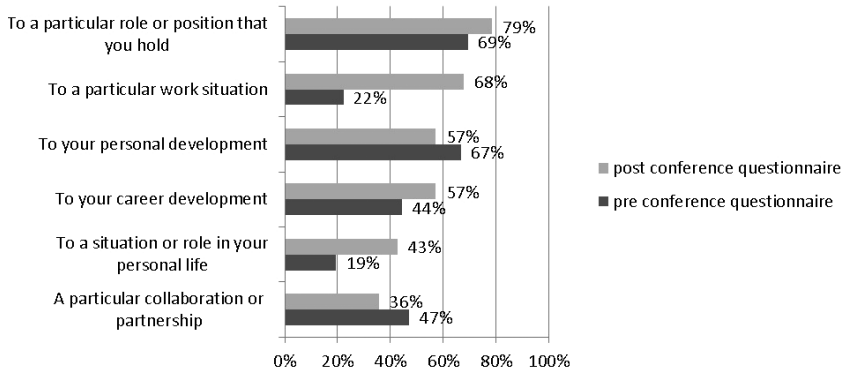
Figure 6.   Rating of answers to: "To which of the following do you hope to apply your learning from the conference" (pre and post conference).

Several gave specific examples of ways in which they hoped to apply their learning at work.

- My work involves a lot of facilitation of large groups and mediation of communities with "authorities". I believe the learning from this conference will be invaluable in developing my abilities to undertake this work (post conference questionnaire).
- In my professional circumstances I hold a lot of different roles which I try to hand on to for the next generation and my staff. The understanding of myself and how roles have been taken up helps me in that task (post conference questionnaire).

There was also a slight increase in the number of respondents seeing the conference as relevant "to career development", with several noting that they had seen new possibilities in this area (again, hinting at a more "transformational" level of learning mentioned earlier).

- I think that as a result of this conference I have a much clearer understanding that my interest in organisational development and strategic change is in these issues of how people work (together) and I intend to increase my study and training in this area (post conference survey).

There was also an increase in the number of people seeing the conference as having relevance to their personal, doubling from 19% to 43%, between the pre and post conference questionnaires. Descriptions of this varied from the highly "revelatory" to the pragmatically helpful:

- For me a Leicester Conference is also a retreat, a ritual, a dive into unknown waters from which there is a hope to return slightly

reborn. This might sound meta-physical, but I see it more as a way of subconscious programming (post conference questionnaire).

- To help me remember and feel what is most important for me to do as a person, in relation to others privately and at work, to make me feel better about myself and how I interact with others (post conference questionnaire).

Nine months after the conference

Very few people returned the final questionnaire, sent out nine months after the conference ended. Of the eight who did so, six reported that they were now applying learning to their life or work either "a lot" or a "great deal", while two indicated they were applying the learning "somewhat".

The reported learning was very similar to that which was described in the post conference questionnaire. This included personal learning in terms of greater insight into their own needs and feelings when interacting with others.

- I find myself acting more true to what I really want, saying or just doing what I think is right for me.
- Over the past year a number of my personal roles and the way I undertake them, including my view of self, have been challenged. Some of the experiences and lessons from Leicester have I think, helped me to take up aspects of my life differently.

Four respondents gave examples of how they were using their learning at work, particularly in terms of taking up authority in new ways and developing a stronger leadership role.

- I offered to, and was endorsed by, my peers to lead a negotiation and development with our funders on a programme of work in a new direction. My preference hitherto would have been to lead from behind with either knowledge or suggestion.
- I am now able to exercise my role with a greater authority, I am more sensitive as a leader to the needs of the people I am leading, I am also better equipped to face the challenges and frustrations of being a leader.

Other changes noted included being better at managing boundaries, and having greater comfort in handling emotionally charged situations.

- I learned especially in the small study group that I can "survive" being in a room with very great and "dangerous tension" and actually learn from it, even though it doesn't feel like it in the situation.

I think this is one of the reasons that I feel calmer in conflict situa-
tions between others or between myself and others.
- In my professional career I find myself feeling more calm and less
tense when I work with conflict resolution, which I think makes me
an even better consultant than before Leicester. At the same time I
feel I'm better able to be in the unforeseen, and work in unpre-
dictable situations.

Two people reported new insights about their own organisation.

- I learned from the design event, and from being part of a group
process creating scapegoat mechanisms, and actually seeing it and
working with, how quickly these mechanism can occur, and how
it feels to be part of a very strong group dynamic working . . . I do
use this when I consult to workplaces where bullying is an issue.
- I see my colleagues as a group and even when a person makes mis-
takes or misunderstands previous engagement, I see it as an
expression of the group mentality and way of work. In few words,
the group and my organization is in my mind as a whole.

The two participants reporting ambivalence about being able to apply
what they had learned from the conference, attributed their difficulty
partly to the constraints created by their organisational role. One
remained hopeful that this might still change:

- I was hoping for some more changes and opportunities and I feel
somewhat disappointed. Perhaps it is too early for me to say.

FEEDBACK ON THE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

As an important part of the project was to explore the dynamics of
undertaking research at the conference, we included questions about
this in both the post conference survey and interview topic guide. 79%
(22) of participants and all the staff responding to the post conference
questionnaire said they had spoken to the researchers during the
conference and 12 offered comments about their experience of the
research. These were mainly positive:

- I found it helpful to have to codify my thoughts a bit to speak with
both of you during the conference. It was useful to reflect on my
experience midway through the conference and then have the
opportunity for further reflection now from my home environ-
ment.
- That was a very good idea as it provides a one-to-one listening post
and opportunities to reflect and ventilate a bit.

Three staff members also observed in an interview that having researchers there contributed to the sense of learning and experimentation and "strengthened the idea that there were things up for study, and signalling approval for this work". One felt that it had been "less intrusive than I had imagined" while also noting that "It is not possible for me to assess the impact it had on the conference itself".

On the less positive side, four people, including two staff members, felt the presence of researchers contributed to a sense of intrusion or self consciousness about being observed. The fact that the researchers came and went during the conference, rather than being there for the whole time, was felt to have contributed to the sense of disruption.

An account of the experience of being, and having, researchers at the conference was presented in an OPUS conference paper in 2013 (Hills et al., 2013), with personal reflections from the two researchers and one of the staff team. The staff member noted some anxiety amongst the conference staff about maintaining the independence of the researchers. While "the presence of the researchers did not emerge as an issue of concern or even interest from the participating membership", it had provoked some "primal staff anxiety about being judged and being good enough, and this manifested itself in a range of behaviours to contain that anxiety by keeping a well contained boundary to the research process".

The concern over the boundary of the conference was also noted by the researchers, who had felt a heightened awareness of:

- the dynamics—unconscious and systemic—of group behaviour—both within and outside the conference itself.
- their role (as researchers) and of the "boundaries" around this role, which are very clearly specified within the conference, and
- having a better understanding of the anxieties that emerge when an "external" researcher enters into "their" system.

Additional reflections on the research experience are given in the next section.

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

In relation to the first aim of the project, to answer research questions posed by conference staff, the research indicated a high level of satisfaction with learning from the conference, and some insights into how different aspects of the conference contributed to this learning. The length of the conference and the fact it was residential were seen as particularly important in creating a heightened intensity to the learning experience. Different events were seen as providing slightly different

opportunities: small groups were particularly useful for personal feed-
back to participants on how they take up roles, or are impacted by, or
impact on, group dynamics. Large groups and intergroup events were
particularly useful in gaining more general insight into group behav-
iour and dynamics. There was considerable learning reported in terms
of feeling more comfortable in difficult group situations, and having a
better experiential grasp of knowledge of groups they had previously
only understood "conceptually".

The fact that participants were clearer at the end, than at the begin-
ning, about the relevance of this learning to their work situation is
interesting given the fact that most, even those who were in employ-
ment, paid for the conference attendance themselves. There were a few
who indicated that the conference was helping them to review their
current career situation, and consider possible changes to this, con-
firming Miller's (1989) observation that the learning generated by the
conference can be quite transformative.

The learning style and sometimes "unexpected" verbal and non
verbal behaviour of staff was sometimes seen as challenging and
shocking, particularly for people new to this kind of work. However,
this was also seen as a powerful way of bringing underlying dynamics,
not usually visible, to the surface. The powerfully emotional nature of
the conference was seen as both challenging, and an opportunity to
learn new ways of relating to ambiguous and emotionally charged
situations.

The desire for more "support", particularly by way of more written
or teaching material, goes to the heart of ongoing debates about the
group relations approach, which places responsibility for learning
firmly in the hands of participants themselves, rather than "feeding"
in pre-digested learning from elsewhere. In some Group Relations
traditions, more by way of teaching—lectures or written material—is
provided. The Leicester conference has always adopted a more purely
experiential approach, although various experiments have been made
over the years, to provide more formal teaching elements. Discussion
of the pros and cons of doing this will probably continue for some
years to come.

In terms of the second aim, of exploring the task of undertaking
research into a group relations event, a key challenge identified at the
outset was how to avoid disrupting the dynamics of the conference
itself. Feedback from staff and participants suggests that having
researchers present did have an impact, but this was generally seen as
being quite positive, supporting rather than getting in the way of the
"learning" task. The concerns that were raised, of creating a sense of
being observed, and consequent anxiety, potentially highlight a tension

inherent in any research activity, but which were particularly visible in an environment in which such tensions are being articulated.

The research also demonstrated that, with relatively limited resources, it is possible to capture a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data about participants' experience of learning, and how different elements of the conference contributed to this. Learning about the longer term impacts of the conference, and how participants apply their learning, was hampered by the low response rate to the last survey (nine months after the conference ended). One interpretation of this is that, at this stage, the conference and its learning had been relegated to the background. However, it could also indicate a reluctance to complete surveys by busy people.

A higher response rate might have been achieved if the follow-up questionnaire had been sent sooner, although this might have limited its usefulness, as several noted that, even nine months later, they were still in the process of integrating and applying their learning. Interviews at this stage might have been more productive, but more resource intensive. Another approach (ensuring learning was not "forgotten") could be to ask participants to keep diaries or report at regular intervals. However, there is a danger that this would generate better data participants with the highest investment in the conference and who are willing to cooperate with such a request.

The decision to attend the conference for short periods (rather than the whole event) was taken partly on pragmatic grounds, but also seen as a way of causing least disruption. Some people felt that this coming and going had added to a sense of disruption, and attending the whole event, from the researchers perspective, would have provided a fuller picture of the conference. However, it could also have risked the researchers "losing" their sense of independence as outsiders. The tensions of staying on the boundary were noted by the researchers, and longer attendance might have heightened the temptation to "chat" with colleagues who were attending as participants. The fact that the researchers were from the organisation running the conference was also seen as a possible source of bias in participants' responses, particularly in interview.

Attending the whole conference would also have added to the burden of analysis, which was already considerable: the research generated two notebooks full of notes from observations and interviews, and qualitative and quantitative data from the five surveys. With such rich data, a number of different analytic approaches could have been adopted. In line with the original aim of presenting an account of the conference suitable for a "lay" audience, a relatively straightforward approach was taken, using simple descriptive statistics and thematic

analysis. However, a more theoretical approach could have been used to test hypotheses drawn from group relations theory. For example, the interface between formal and explicit, versus experiential and implicit learning, could fruitfully be explored using French and Simpson's (2001) exploration of Bion's notion of "working at the edges between knowing and not knowing". Alternatively, theoretical perspectives on the same theme from other fields, such as those of Polanyi (1983) or Nonaka (1991) could be used.

Our final observation is that the project required a balance of research skills and knowledge of group relations theory and practice. A level of distance from the group relations field helped us (as researchers) to maintain a level of "innocence" required to ask simple questions and perhaps, bring a fresh eye to the event. As Miller observed in 1989, in relation to keeping the freshness of learning from the conference alive: "Having directed very many Leicester and other conferences for over 20 years" … "I have to work hard to become 'inexperienced'—to lower my defences against recognizing that I have never before been with these people in this setting at this moment" (Miller, 1989, p. 17).

On the other hand, having *some* experience of group relations activities was also important. Failure to appreciate dynamics, such as those around boundaries and their management, would have had negative implications both on the quality of research and for the conference as a whole.

References

Bateson, G. (1973). *Towards an Ecology of the Mind*. St Albans: Paladin.

Brunner, L. D., Nutkevitch, A., & Sher, M. (2006). *Group Relations Conferences*. London; Karnac.

French, R., & Simpson, P. (2001). Learning at the edges of knowing and not knowing: "Translating Bion". *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, *1*(1): 54–77.

Hills, D., Doidge, S., & Brisset, L. (2013). Some reflections on the dynamics of undertaking research in the field of group relations: experiences from the Leicester Conference 2012. Opus conference paper, unpublished.

Klein, E., Stone, W., Correa, M., Astrachan, J., & Kossek, E. (1989). Dimensions of experiential learning at group relations conferences. *Soc. Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *24*: 241–248.

Miller, E. (1989). The 'Leicester' model: experiential study of group and organizational processes. *Tavistock Institute of Human Relations Occasional Paper No. 10*. London: Tavistock.

Nonaka, I. (1991). The knowledge-creating company. *Harvard Business Review*, *69*(Nov.–Dec.): 96–104.

Polanyi, M. (1983). *The Tacit Dimension*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith.

Rice, A. K. (1965). *Learning for Leadership: Intergroup and Interpersonal Relations*. London, Tavistock.

Solvik, P. (2002). *Mapping the Market for the Leicester Conference*. Internal Tavistock Institute paper.

Trist, E. L., & Sofer, C. (1959). *Exploration in Group Relations*. Leicester, England: Leicester University Press.

Wallach, T. (2014). What do participants learn at Group Relations Conferences? *Organisational & Social Dynamics*, *14*(1): 13–38.