

## Dimensions of experiential learning at group relations conferences\*

Edward B. Klein<sup>1</sup>, Walter N. Stone<sup>1</sup>, Mary E. Correa<sup>1</sup>, Joseph H. Astrachan<sup>2</sup>, and Ellen E. Kossek<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio,

<sup>2</sup> Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, and

<sup>3</sup> Michigan State University, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

**Summary.** Four hundred and seventy-seven professionals attended thirteen group relations conferences. Conferences varied across three dimensions: *context*, including sponsorship and history; *design*, involving duration, intensity (residential setting) and complexity; and *linkages*, the social and authority ties between members and staff. Three month follow-up questionnaires were collected from sixty percent of participants. Significantly more self-assessed learning was reported by those who attended the residential than the non-residential conferences. The results, from a large diversified sample, suggest that a *combination* of training in a residential setting, strong institutional sponsorship and pre-existing authority and social linkages between members and staff resulted in the most reported learning. Group relations conferences provide unique learning opportunities for mental health professionals, (Correa et al. 1981) and have been increasingly used in the United States and Europe during the last twenty years. Despite this, there is little research evaluating the outcomes of such training in terms of member learning or the differential effectiveness of the alternative forms of conferences currently available. Conferences vary along three major dimensions: a) *context*, including the institutional sponsorship as well as the history of previous conferences held at the same site, b) *design*, including the duration, intensity and number of events which make up the conference, and c) *linkages*, the social and authority relations among members and staff. A review of the first decade of group relations work in the United States concluded that the characteristics of a conference, including the setting have an important impact on member learning, (Klein 1978). Since this review, there have been few studies that address the relationship between conference characteristics and outcomes. Using a large sample of conferences which were held in six different geographic regions of the United States, the present study investigates the rela-

tionship between outcomes in terms of self-reported member learning and the context, design and linkage dimensions of the conferences.

### History

The group relations orientation was developed at the Tavistock Institute in London, England. It evolved from the object relations school of psychoanalysis initiated by Klein (1959). Bion (1959) applied this analytic perspective to small groups. Others expanded upon this work and developed a sociotechnical approach to understanding complex systems (Trist and Bamforth 1951; Menzies 1960; Miller and Rice 1969). This orientation formed the basis for the Group Relations Conferences, described by Rice (1965) as bounded, temporary educational institutions where members learn about authority and leadership and the impact of group dynamics on organizational life through direct experience.

This form of group training is carried out in America by the A.K. Rice Institute (AKRI) and its affiliated regional centers. The dynamic social psychological approach of AKRI has much in common with that of the American based National Training Laboratories (NTL). Both organizations usually hold training events away from work settings in order to draw a boundary separating the educational task of the temporary training system from daily activities. This serves to minimize distractions as well as to limit the social and technical consequences of training behavior for the work environment. Such consequences are generally viewed as constraints on the freedom of participants to explore their own behavior in organizational settings. Both approaches use small groups usually made up of strangers, in order to deemphasize the impact of ongoing authority and peer relations, providing a setting where members are freer to learn.

The two differ in that the AKRI orientation is focused on covert dynamics and group level phenome-

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na rather than overt interpersonal relations (Singer et al. 1975). AKRI consultants interpret group as a whole phenomena (Wells 1985) and limit their social contact with members during the training conferences, thereby creating distance and fostering transference fantasies (Klein 1977).

AKRI conferences vary in length and intensity from non-residential weekends in regional centers to the annual nine-day residential National Conference. Weekend conferences are often co-sponsored by AKRI regional centers and various local organizations. Conference designs draw on six events. Four events emphasize experiential learning: the small group studies its own group behavior with a consultant; the large group with all members and a team of consultants explores the rapidly changing dynamics of a non face-to-face group; the intergroup exercise examines participants' experience of authority while forming and then interacting with other member groups; and the institutional event explores interactions between member groups as well as their political relationship to staff as management. The remaining two events emphasize integration of cognitive learning; the application group examines the role each member has taken and applies this experience to work roles, and conference discussions provide opportunities for reflection upon the experiences of the total conference.

### Prior research on member learning

Research has shown that group relations conferences lead to member learning about authority, leadership, followership, power and covert group dynamics (Joseph et al. 1975). These authors note the importance of social systems context on learning in AKRI training conferences, but could not generalize since their research took place in only one organizational setting. Menninger (1985) attributed positive impact to having 142 staff members of the same institution attend various group relations conferences over a ten year period.

Only one study directly contrasted group conferences in different organizational contexts. Klein et al. (1983) studied the effects of social systems on learning in two different settings: non-residential conferences held at a university and at a medical school. Follow-up data showed that members of the university conference reported greater participation and learning than did those attending the medical school conference. It was suggested that these findings were the result of multiple sponsorship (an indication of legitimacy and support of training), a more open learning environment (a willingness to bring in new people and

ideas) and strong authority and sentient (social) linkages between members and staff (connections at work and how well people know each other) at the university. In addition, from the NTL tradition, Bunker and Knowles (1967) found that participants in three weeks of residential training changed more than those who attended a two week T-group. Therefore, duration (time spent in training) appears to be an important correlate of learning.

### Hypotheses

The present study enlarges upon previous samples in number and diversity of conferences in order to more fully investigate dimensions that facilitate learning at group relations training events. Conference dimensions include a) *context* defined as *sponsorship* in the form of formal institutional support or financial backing; *history*, the number of prior group relations conferences at the same site, and fit, the degree of congruence between conference norms and values and those of the sponsoring institutions, b) *design*, defined in terms of the *duration*, number of days, *intensity*, residential or nonresidential, and *complexity*, the number of different types of events offered as well as c) *linkages*, the preexisting *social* and *authority* relations between members and staff.

We hypothesized that 1. *intensity*, defined by residential status should enhance learning and 2. reported member learning at the conferences would occur in the following order from high to low National, Religious, West, East, Central and Medical. The predicted ordering is based on the number of context, design and linkage variables which are hypothesized to favor learning that are associated with a particular conference. Specifically, in terms of a) *context*, we expect strong institutional support, a long history of previous conferences and a fit between the innovative, psychodynamic and experiential learning modality of the conference and the dominant culture of the sponsoring institution<sup>1</sup> will result in a higher level of reported learning. With respect to b) *design*, we expect longer duration, higher intensity due to residential status and higher complexity levels to be associated with greater member learning. Finally, with respect to c) *linkages*, we expect that increased ties between members and staff will be associated with higher levels of reported member learning.

<sup>1</sup> Fit between conference and sponsoring organization can occur in two ways. There may be an actual match between the major norms and values of the two or the sponsoring organizations may exhibit an openness to diverse and/or innovative ideas and practice with respect to group and systems

**Table 1.** Context, design, and people characteristics of thirteen conferences

Conference	Context		Design			Linkages	
	Sponsors	No. Conferences	No. Days	Intensity	No. Events	Social links	Authority links
National, 1982	AKRI	18	9	R <sup>a</sup>	6	3 <sup>b</sup>	3 <sup>b</sup>
National, 1983	AKRI	19	9	R	6	3	3
Religious, 1980	D/C <sup>c</sup>	12	5	R	6	4	4
Religious, 1981	D/C	13	5	R	6	4	4
Religious, 1983	D/C	15	2-1/2	NR	4	4	4
West, 1978	D/C	3	2-1/2	NR	4	3	3
West, 1981	D/C	9	2-1/2	NR	4	3	3
West, 1982	D/C	10	2-1/2	NR	4	3	3
West, 1983	D/C	11	2-1/2	NR	4	3	3
East, 1982	D	6	2-1/2	NR	4	2	2
East, 1983	D	7	2-1/2	NR	4	2	2
Central, 1983	D/C	3	2-1/2	NR	4	3	2
Medical, 1978	D/C	1	2	NR	4	1	1

<sup>a</sup> R = Residential; NR = Non-residential Conference; <sup>b</sup> 1 = Very weak; 2 = Weak; 3 = Strong; 4 = Very strong; <sup>c</sup> D = Department; C = Regional center

### Samples and conference description

Thirteen group relations conferences held between 1978 and 1983 were studied. All included small groups, intergroup exercises, application groups and discussion sessions. Conferences which were held in six locations are described below and summarized in Table 1. While the designs were similar, the characteristics of the conferences differed in the following seven ways: sponsorship; history; duration; intensity; complexity; and the extent of social and authority linkages between members and staff<sup>2</sup>.

The two National Conferences were sponsored by the AKRI and were the eighteenth and nineteenth annual training events. They lasted nine days, were residential and had six training events. Members, primarily mental health professionals from various regions of the country, had strong authority and social links to staff who also came from regional centers. Many links had been formed during prior attendance at weekend conferences sponsored by regional AKRI centers. Participation at such a residential conference is a prerequisite for members who wish to be considered for a consultant role in future AKRI sponsored conferences.

The Religious Conferences were co-sponsored by an AKRI center and an academic department of a prestigious Catholic university. The university provided financial assistance to any member who requested it. These were the twelfth, thirteenth and fifteenth conferences sponsored by this university. The 1980 and 1981 Religious Conferences lasted five days, were residential and included six events. The 1983 Re-

ligious Conference was a non-residential weekend with four events. Members at the three Religious Conferences primarily were graduate students at this Catholic university or otherwise affiliated with the Church. Very strong authority and social ties existed between members and staff. A senior faculty member with administrative authority within the department who was affiliated with AKRI was on all staffs and directed two of the three conferences. This director was a charismatic professor who taught courses that many members returned to after the conferences.

The West Conferences were co-sponsored by an AKRI center and various academic departments. They were the third, ninth, tenth and eleventh conference held in the West. The conferences were held at an urban university on weekends, were non-residential with four training events. Members were mental health students, trainees and managers. Half the staff were university faculty; there were strong preexisting authority and social links between many members and consultants.

The East Conferences were sponsored by two academic departments. The conferences were the sixth and seventh training events. They were non-residential weekends with four events. Members were part-time students who attended an open, innovative graduate school one day a week. Since most of the consultants were outsiders there were weak authority and social linkages between members and consultants. However, because most students were meeting a training requirement by attending, there was an institutional authority link between members and the two sponsoring academic departments.

The Central Conference, co-sponsored by an AKRI center and an extension division, was the third training event held at this state university. It was a

<sup>2</sup> These variables were not experimentally manipulated. Rather, variance was naturally occurring

**Table 2.** Analysis of variance of conference

Structure	Conference
<i>Amount learned In:</i>	
Intergroup event	N R E W M <sup>b</sup> (4.3, 4.2, 4.1, 3.7, 3.1)
Application group	R W E M N <sup>a</sup> (3.9, 3.6, 3.5, 3.3, 3.2)
Conference discussion	C R E N W M <sup>b</sup> (4.0, 3.8, 3.4, 3.2, 3.1, 3.1)
<i>Topics learned about</i>	
Delegation of authority	R C N E W M <sup>b</sup> (4.1, 3.9, 3.9, 3.7, 3.5, 3.4)
Use of personal power	E C N R W M <sup>a</sup> (4.3, 4.1, 4.1, 4.1, 3.9, 3.7)
Group dynamics	R N E C W M <sup>b</sup> (4.4, 4.3, 4.2, 4.1, 4.0, 3.6)
Principles of leadership	R N E C W M <sup>b</sup> (4.2, 4.0, 3.8, 3.6, 3.4, 3.2)
Principles of followership	R N C E W M <sup>b</sup> (4.0, 3.9, 3.8, 3.5, 3.2, 3.1)
Unconscious processes	N R C E W M <sup>a</sup> (4.4, 4.2, 4.2, 4.2, 4.0, 3.5)
Organization dynamics	R N C W E M <sup>a</sup> (3.9, 3.8, 3.4, 3.4, 3.4, 3.3)
Group effect on task	R E N W C M <sup>b</sup> (4.4, 4.1, 4.1, 3.9, 3.9, 3.5)
Interpersonal problems of leadership	R N C E W M <sup>b</sup> (4.4, 4.3, 3.9, 3.9, 3.9, 3.6)
<i>Overall criteria</i>	
Overall learning	R N C E W M <sup>b</sup> (4.4, 4.3, 4.1, 4.1, 3.9, 3.6)
Overall emotional impact	N E C R W M <sup>b</sup> (4.5, 4.2, 4.2, 4.0, 4.0, 3.4)
Recommend to a friend	N R C E W M <sup>a</sup> (4.6, 4.4, 4.4, 4.2, 4.2, 3.7)
Generalized knowledge gained	R N C W E M <sup>b</sup> (4.5, 4.4, 4.2, 4.0, 4.0, 3.6)
Describe conference	R C M N E W <sup>b</sup> (4.6, 4.1, 4.1, 3.9, 3.8, 3.7)

Entries are the first letter of the conference with the highest evaluations for each variable by location: N=National, R=Religious, E=East, W=West, C=Central, M=Medical. (Blank=no data for Central Conference). Means are presented in parentheses in the same order as the letters preceding them. Numbers in italics in parentheses indicate statistically significant differences between conferences. <sup>a</sup>  $P < 0.05$ ; <sup>b</sup>  $P < 0.01$

non-residential weekend with four events. A number of people from governmental and political groups were attracted to this training conference. Although there were some social connections between staff and members, authority ties linking colleagues of the same university were lacking.

The Medical Conference was co-sponsored by an AKRI center and an academic department. It was the only AKRI conference offered at this university where other group approaches such as NTL, were more popular. It was held in the Medical School on two work days, was non-residential and had four events. This was the only conference held during the week at the primary work site for members and as a consequence boundaries between the training conference and daily activities of the Medical school

were difficult to form and maintain. All members were health professionals from the local area. There were very weak authority and social links between members and consultants, all of whom were outsiders.

Table 1 shows the context, design and linkage characteristics of the thirteen conferences. The National had the longest *history* (largest number of conferences previously held at its location) and *duration* (number of days of training). The residential Religious and National Conferences were more *intense* (being residential, members spent more time together) and *complex* (more events) than the shorter weekends. The Religious Conferences had the strongest *social* and *authority* links between members and staff. The Medical Conference was the shortest in *history* and *duration* and had the weakest *social* and *authority* links between members and consultants.

## Method

The conference administrator or a research assistant mailed a postcard and brief questionnaire to members approximately three months following the event to allow for distance and integration (Bunker and Knowles 1967). Respondents gave informed consent by signing a separate postcard. In seven of the conferences more extensive data were collected than in the others. What is reported is the follow-up *common* to all thirteen conferences.

Attendees anonymously filled out a questionnaire which has been shown to be an effective, non-intrusive measure of member learning (Correa et al. 1981) The questionnaire contained at least twenty three five-point Likert-type scales. Members rated seven *structural* items; learning in the small, intergroup, application group and conference discussion and staff facilitation of the first three events. Members also evaluated how much they learned about ten specific *topics*: delegation of authority, intergroup relations, the use of personal power, group dynamics, principles of leadership, principles of followership, unconscious processes, organizational dynamics, group effect on task performance and interpersonal problems of leadership. Finally, they rated the following six *criteria*: overall learning, overall emotional impact, recommend the conference to a friend, generalizability of knowledge gained, desire to attend another conference in the future, and the extent to which they could describe the conference three months later. In sum, members provided ratings on twenty-three common follow-up questions.

## Results

Four hundred and seventy seven members attended the conferences. Overall, there were more women attendees, which is in keeping with group training events nationally. Consistent with other surveys, 60% of members (287) responded to the three month follow-up questionnaire.

Table 2 shows the results of  $6 \times 2$  Analyses of Variance of conference and member gender<sup>3</sup> for all significant ratings. Overall, seventeen of the twenty three items rated involved statistically significant main effects. The table entries are the first letter of the conference with the highest evaluations for each variable by location.

The Religious (R) and National (N) Conferences were first in fifteen of the seventeen conference main effects. They respectively accounted for eleven and four of the fifteen main effects. Members at the Religious Conferences reported more learning in the application group and in seven topic areas: delegation of authority, group dynamics, principles of leadership and followership, organizational dynamics, group effect on task performance and interpersonal problems in the exercise of leadership. Religious Conference members were also highest on three criteria: overall learning, generalizability of knowledge gained and the ability to describe the conference three months later.

Members of the National Conferences were highest on reported amount learned in the intergroup, amount learned about unconscious processes and the criteria of overall emotional impact and likelihood of recommending the conference to a friend. Central (C) Conference members were first on reported learning in the conference discussion. Members at the East (E) Conferences were highest on amount learned about the use of personal power.

Tukey's (1953) studentized range tests were performed on all the significant conference main effects. Means of the conferences are represented in parentheses in the same order as the letters of the conferences which proceed them in Table 2. Underlining of means in parentheses indicates statistically significant differences, at the 0.05 level, between conferences. In general, the Religious and National Con-

ferences were first and second, respectively, with only one significant difference between them: members of the Religious ranked higher than those at the National Conferences in the amount learned in the application group. The greatest differences were found between the Medical Conference and the Religious and National Conferences. Medical School members rated last on fifteen of the seventeen measures of learning. These ratings were significantly lowest on seven of the ten topic areas, and on four of the six criteria.

To evaluate whether the effects were primarily due to the lower learning reported by Medical School members, an analysis, without including the Medical Conference, was performed. The results of these  $5 \times 2$  Analyses of Variance of conference and gender showed 16 statistically significant conference main effects with 14 favoring the Religious or National over the weekend conferences. The differences occurred on most of the same items as in Table 2. The self reported learning, from highest to lowest, was Religious, National, East, Central and West Conferences.

To evaluate the effects of residential status,  $2 \times 2$  Analyses of Variance of residential status and gender were done. Thirteen statistically significant residential main effects were found; *all* favored the residential over the non-residential conferences.

The three analyses taken together show that the residential conferences have the highest reported learning. Next are the various weekend conferences, with minor differences between them. Last is the Medical School with the lowest reported learning<sup>4</sup>.

## Discussion

The prediction that more learning would be reported by those members who attended the residential conferences was supported by the findings. Of the seventeen statistically significant main effects, fifteen favored the National and Religious Conferences. Residential status and duration did not seem to be the only elements that contributed to this consistent finding. Strong organizational sponsors, authority

<sup>3</sup> Six (categories of conferences grouped into six geographic locations)  $\times$  2 (Gender of member) Analyses of Variance were computed. Before grouping the individual conferences into categories statistical tests showed that within conference (i.e., across the individual (yearly) conferences which make up a conference category) differences were negligible. Only conference effects are reported because gender is not the focus of the paper. Another study (Correa et al. 1988) has examined how gender affects member learning

<sup>4</sup> Even though a number of characteristics are confounded in this study, we believe the following holds. Stronger sponsors and authority and social ties between staff and members helped to produce more learning at the residential over the non-residential, the weekends over the Medical and the Religious over the National Conferences. Duration and number of events do not matter when the residential and non-residential conferences are analyzed separately. They may matter between the two, since residential are twice as long and have 50% more events than non-residential conferences

and social links between members and staff and the greater intensity of the residential Religious and National Conferences led to more reported learning than the various nonresidential training events. At least two alternative explanations arise to understand these findings. On the one hand, the commitment represented by the investment of time and money to attend a residential conference may be a proxy for basic acceptance of the A.K. Rice model either as a function of previous experience or because of strong linkages to those recommending participation or assuming staff roles. This acceptance may then generate the favorable expectations known to be associated with positive outcomes in group training events (Lieberman et al. 1973).

On the other hand, strong prior linkages between members and staff may serve four functions which could account for higher levels of learning. 1. These relationships may serve as a buffer in a residential conference where there are opportunities for informal contact between events as members struggle with the anomie associated with negotiating and understanding the boundary between the self and the group. 2. The presence of a familiar staff member may serve a holding function by symbolically reinforcing the continuity of the self. 3. The conference may offer opportunities to explore the relationships members and staff bring with them in a new and potentially enlightening way. 4. The presence of significant linkages between members and staff creates a bridge across the boundary of the temporary social system of the conference, providing opportunities for consensual validation and shared learning in the back home situation. Indeed, in the Religious Conferences many members returned to an on-going course. While both these explanations require empirical validation, it is interesting to consider the second in view of the conventional wisdom that such linkages are usually a constraint.

What was surprising was the lack of the predicted superiority of the longer National over the briefer Religious Conferences. In retrospect, it is apparent that the powerful institutional support of the Catholic university led to a great deal of learning. This finding is in keeping with religious writers who have observed that group life is deeply embedded in the church (Wedel 1962). Note that many Religious Conference members live in group settings: many participants were nuns who live in religious communities. In such settings, the quality of intracommunity relations are addressed and considered central to the spiritual life of the group.

The AKRI teaches about authority relations which were centrally important at the Religious Conferences where most members were connected to a church

known for its powerful hierarchy. Freud (1921) and later Bion (1959) used the church to exemplify dependency on supreme authority. Indeed, the dependency culture of the church may have been reinforced in two of the three Religious Conferences because the director had multiple authority roles with respect to members. He was an administrator and teacher at the university and a priest in the church and a minister to some of the members. These social roles carry a great deal of authority which was further enhanced by the charismatic personal qualities of the individual. Such roles also suggest the nature of intergroup relations embedded (Alderfer and Smith 1982) in the Religious Conference and in the work situations of many members where the employer-employee relationship is embedded in the hierarchical relation between priest and layman or the more intimate relation of confessor and penitent. Therefore, institutional support of the university, group life embedded in religious communities and the dependency culture of the church attenuated the effect of duration.

It is not suggested that just having a residential training event is sufficient to produce maximum learning. As noted previously, Bunker and Knowles (1967) reported more changes in the back home work situation for participants in a three rather than two week residential t-group. But the shorter t-group training eliminated application groups which focus on the use of group learning in the work place. In this study the National and Religious Conferences had similar proportions of application work which aids members in using new learning after the conference ends.

We suggest that it is a *combination* of residential status (with both greater intensity and complexity), strong sponsors (who successfully recruit and finance a committed membership) and authority and social links between members and staff, which is needed to increase the amount of reported learning. There may also be a ceiling effect; five days in residence may be sufficient for learning or nine days may produce too much emotion for effective learning.

While further evidence is necessary to demonstrate a causal relationship between the above variable combination and member learning, some support for this hypothesis is derived from the negative findings with respect to the Medical School Conference. In this case, both context and linkage dimensions were seen as likely to impede learning and this conference had the least reported learning of the sample. In terms of context, this conference had no precedent at the site. It was held in a medical academic setting in which there seemed to be more investment in a single model than in an eclectic approach or the exploration of new ideas. The individ-

ual most instrumental in developing the conference was a non-physician and thus of lower status within the hierarchy of Medicine.

From the standpoint of linkage, there were virtually no ties between the staff and the membership, although the consultants did mirror the disciplinary make up of the majority of the membership, physicians, psychologists and nurses. However, there were many linkages among the membership as this was essentially an inhouse conference made up of people who work together. In this case, real authority and peer relationships, as these affected both task and sentience, suffused the temporary educational institution of the conference. Further, the impact of these specific linkages was confounded by a major interdepartmental conflict within the Medical Center. The conflict was unknown to the staff at the time but within weeks of the conference became headline news. The conflict involved two of the disciplines represented in the conference. The contract which was negotiated with a member of the third discipline, may have expressed an implicit wish to address the local intergroup problems. However, the lack of either a geographic (off site) or temporal (after work or on weekends) boundary, may have resulted in powerful defensive attempts to bind off the anxiety provoking experience. Such defenses were likely to have been misinterpreted by the outsider staff and thus allowed to interfere with learning.

Overall, hypothesis 2 was not supported. The weekend conferences could be characterized as having negligible differences. Organizational issues which were expected to produce marked effects did not do so. Indeed, these brief events turned out to be more similar than different. We speculate that weekend members may have sampled the training and needed another experience to maximize learning, while some who attended the National Conferences were returnees who believed in the approach and therefore learned more from the staff. This line of thought is in keeping with Lieberman et al. (1973) who found that realistically positive expectations are related to learning in training groups. Residential conferences also provide less opportunity to run away from anxiety and the resultant learning which such training events foster.

We suggest that the few differences between weekend conferences may be the effect of the way conferences mirror the larger social systems in which they are embedded (Rioch 1977). In the present study, we were particularly struck with parallels between content areas with the highest level of reported learning and unique features of the larger social system of the particular conference. East Conference members learned most about personal power, possibly because they

were part time students who were minimally joined to their school and who individually negotiated training with their academic departments. Central members learned most in the Conference Discussion maybe because they were from political and governmental groups interested in organized discussion of larger conference and societal issues. The lack of a single significant finding for the West Conferences, is probably due to members coming from many disciplines attending conferences with a large number of co-sponsors, thereby learning about a variety of issues.

The four variables that the National members learned about the most also may have reflected the characteristics of the conferences and membership. Since both members and staff were drawn from regional centers throughout the country they learned the most in the Intergroup Event. Having the largest percentage of dynamically oriented mental health professionals National members learned about unconscious processes in groups. Being in the longest conferences in duration they experienced the most overall emotional impact. Finally, because they may have found great value in this intense experience, National members were most likely to recommend the conference to a friend.

### **Implications for theory, practice and research**

This study has highlighted the importance of considering context, design and linkage characteristics of conferences when planning psychological training for professionals. What has been perceived as a constraint in the past (authority and social links) may be a rich opportunity to explore such ties, since work and social relations between members and staff facilitate learning-particularly when both groups share an intense residential experience. Malan et al. (1976) found that patients who benefited the most from group had prior psychotherapy and were familiar with the treatment format and the therapist's stance. Prior linkages between members and staff may parallel these group therapy findings.

In terms of practical implications we suggest that conference directors keep the following issues in mind when designing training events: 1. Develop a relationship with the sponsoring organization(s) to facilitate a clear work contract, give legitimacy to the conference and enhance recruitment of committed members with realistic expectations. 2. Hire a diverse staff, some of whom have authority and social links to the membership. 3. Hold the conference in residence, off site, away from work, to draw a boundary that separates the training from daily activities. 4. If only two days are available for training use a

weekend rather than regular work days for the event. 5. Have follow-up work to help members integrate the experience and enhance the learning. These suggestions should facilitate the development of an environment where staff and members can work together to strengthen learning.

Because so many of the characteristics studied are confounded, further research is needed. Three specific studies come to mind. 1. With regard to *context*, what needs to be investigated is whether it's the number of sponsors, degree of financial assistance, proportion of staff from the sponsoring institution or some combination of these that most facilitates member learning. 2. To separate the effects of *complexity* and *duration* a number of weekend conferences of equal length with the same sponsors and similar membership and staff, can be compared. Some could have a small group, intergroup design while the others had these two events plus a large group. We predict that three experiential events on a weekend conference would be disruptive for members and decrease learning. 3. The present study clearly highlights the importance of social and authority linkages between member and staff. Another *linkage* characteristic, the extent of knowing other conference members, as measured by a pre-conference network analysis, we predict tentatively, will lead to enhanced learning.

Thirteen group relations conferences that varied across the dimensions of context, design and linkage were studied. Significantly more learning was reported by those who attended the residential conferences. It appears that a combination of training in a residential setting, strong institutional sponsorship and prior authority and social linkages between members and staff resulted in the most reported learning. Based on these findings we discussed theoretical implications, recommended five practical issues for directors when designing training events and three research studies to enhance understanding of member learning at group relations conferences

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E. B. Klein, Ph. D.  
 Department of Psychology  
 McMicken College of Arts and Sciences  
 University of Cincinnati  
 Dyer Hall (ML 376)  
 Cincinnati, Ohio 45221-0376  
 USA