

## The study of groups "WILFRED BION"

Pub. ROUTLEDGE

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*The self-deception in virtue of which a human individual regards himself as real in his separateness from all things, and pre-supposes this fictitious isolation to be the true ground and only starting-point for all his relations – this self-deception of abstract subjectivism plays terrible havoc not only in the domain of metaphysics – which, indeed, it abolishes altogether – but also in the domain of the moral and political life.*

(Solovyov 1918: 200)

Before his mature studies on the nature of the psychoanalytic process and thinking, Bion had already done pioneering work with groups. Throughout this work we can see foreshadowed many aspects of his later works. As we trace through his work on groups we shall try to show the threads that connect this work with his more mature ideas.

When Bion reached the age of 50, the Professional Committee of the Tavistock Clinic asked him to take therapeutic groups, using his own techniques. In response to this request, he wrote,

It was disconcerting to find that the Committee seemed to believe that patients could be cured in such groups as these. It made me think at the outset that their expectations of what happened in groups of which I was a member were very different from mine. Indeed, the only cure of which I could speak with certainty was related to a comparatively minor symptom of my own – a belief that groups might take kindly to my efforts.

(Bion 1961: 29)

He mentions that he had had the experience of trying to persuade groups of patients to make the study of their tensions a group

task. This was what has become known as the Northfield experiment, which we shall consider below.

Bion set about studying groups through observation and interpretation. He therefore combined the observational and experimental method. Interpretations are interventions which alter the behaviour of the group, so he observed the effect of these interpretations. As the group was his object of study he did not interpret the behaviour of individuals, though he was tempted to do so. So the members of the group would take their places and expected him to say something, explain how they were to proceed or do something to set the ball rolling. Instead of fulfilling their expectations he interpreted their expectations, of him and discovered that these interventions were most unwelcome. Through such a procedure he observed the way the group functioned and formulated certain principles thereon.

A group has a consciously designated task. The co-operative mental activity that is engaged in this task Bion named the work group. The term *work group* refers not to the people who constitute the group but to the mental activity in which they are engaged. This is the group which tries to look at itself and the group process scientifically, to observe itself, and to contain and speak about feelings rather than discharge them. Bion observed, however, another level of mental activity. To focus on this level was like focusing on a different layer of a too-thick microscope slide; one focus revealed the work group, but a shift in mental focus revealed another level of mental activity in which the group appeared to take no responsibility for what was happening, for example the banal level of conversation, and they did not appear to be listening when Bion made an interpretation. This other level of mental activity Bion called *basic assumptions*.

Work group activity is obstructed, diverted, and on occasion assisted, by certain other mental activities that have in common the attributes of powerful emotional drives. These activities, at first sight chaotic, are given a certain cohesion if it is assumed that they spring from basic assumptions common to all the group.

(Bion 1961: 146)

In a group there is always a basic assumption active at any one moment in time. There are three basic assumptions and if one is present then the other two are thereby excluded. The basic

assumptions are the dependent group, the fight-flight group and the pairing group, and like the work group each of these describes a mode of mental functioning of the group, not the persons who constitute it.

In the dependent group one person is selected and then expected to fulfil the role of provider to other members of the group, or, as Bion puts it:

The basic assumption in this group culture seems to be that an external object exists whose function it is to provide security for the immature organism. This means that one person is always felt to be in a position to supply the needs of the group, and the rest in a position in which these needs are supplied.

(Bion 1961: 74)

The selected person relieves the rest from the need to be responsible, to think and work out things for themselves. In the therapeutic group the selected person is usually the psychiatrist, psychologist or psychoanalyst. When the analyst interprets the way the group is functioning, his intervention is most unwelcome. The group believes it has a right to expect this appointed leader to behave in the way which it wants. When he does not behave according to expectations the group believes he is being perverse or deliberately provocative.

The dependent group culture is in each of us but only becomes observable when human beings are in visible and audible relation to one another. Bion disagrees with the view that an instinct – the herd instinct – comes into operation when people gather together in numbers but is absent when an individual is in isolation from the group. He says we are groupish beings and those elements are operative in us all the time but they only become observable when we are in a group: 'The apparent difference between group psychology and individual psychology is an illusion produced by the fact that the group brings into prominence phenomena that appear alien to an observer unaccustomed to using the group' (Bion 1968: 134).

Our individual psychic make-up is intimately related to others, both the tendency to form constructively working groups and the potential, or valency, as Bion called it, for forming any of the basic assumption mental states when in a physical group setting with others.

Bion says that the basic assumption of the group is that 'people come together as a group for the purposes of preserving the group'

(Bion 1968: 63). That the grouping tendency is made manifest in the act of coming together is clear, but to postulate that the basic assumption of the individuals of the group is that they foregather to preserve the group suggests that they feel that the group has a natural tendency to disintegrate. This is what the group members fear and endlessly discuss when, for example, some member is absent. But there is no corresponding tendency of working to make the group worth preserving. Being in the group is, for a long time, felt to be all that is necessary.

In the groups it was made clear to Bion that although the assumption was that people had gathered in order to preserve the group, the object of this preservation was the group functioning under one of the basic assumptions. The group members' numerous complaints that they could not see what the interpretations, the emotions to which Bion was trying to draw their attention, had to do with their problems, that they could not remember what had happened in previous groups, indicated their difficulty in learning from experience. The process of development itself is hated. Bion, however, goes on to say:

this is not simply a negative attitude; the process of development is really being compared with some other state ... like arriving fully equipped as an adult fitted by instinct to know without training or development exactly how to live and move and have his being in a group. There is only one kind of group that approximates to this dream, and that is ... the group dominated by one of the three basic assumptions.

(Bion 1961: 89)

Bion understood that this antipathy to learning from experience was the major factor underlying all defensive stances. He entitled one of his books *Learning from Experience*, and his elaborations of this formed his life's work.

An individual can contribute anonymously to the group without having to take individual responsibility for this contribution. But there is a penalty for this; that person does not then receive recognition as an individual and the problems which brought him or her to the group will not be addressed as such. The basic assumption mentality ignores the individual, who is therefore in two minds about his or her group membership.

Another basic assumption of the group is the view that fighting and running away are the only mechanisms it can use to preserve

the group. The idea of using understanding is anathema to the fight-flight group.

The key to understanding the fight-flight group is in the following sentence:

There will be a feeling that the welfare of the individual does not matter so long as the group continues, and there will be a feeling that any method of dealing with neurosis that is neither fighting neurosis nor running away from the owner of it is either non-existent or directly opposed to the good of the group; a method like my own is not recognized as proper to either of the basic techniques of the group.

(Bion 1961: 64)

The group looks for a leader who will lead the group either in flight from the enemy, that is, the feared state of mind, or to fight with the suffering victim; when the psychoanalyst or psychologist leader of the work group does not participate in this attitude, he is felt to be shirking. A more suitable leader is then found in someone who already has an enemy in mind, for example, someone who is paranoid. The group therefore may choose a leader who is frequently the most disturbed member of the group; if not overtly paranoid, then possibly someone with psychopathic tendencies. The enemy as perceived by the group is the work group state of mind and what it threatens in the way of insight and painful feelings.

Bion's method, which is the work group mentality, is inimical to the basic techniques of the group because he continues to pursue clarification of that psychopathology which the group would prefer to flee from or else obliterate. Paradoxically Bion's method is caring of the individual through making a stand for observation and thinking which will then lead to mental development. He will not collude with the group's desire to locate an 'enemy' perhaps in an individual or even in an idea. Instead he interprets the group's desire to do just this. Just as in the dependent group one person is selected as the provider to the group; in the fight-flight group an enemy is selected and, either through fight or flight in relation to this enemy, the group 'feels' cohesive. In reality, however, the group has not solved its underlying disintegration but merely and temporarily hidden from itself this knowledge. Through the mechanism of fight or flight the group tries to destroy knowledge through action. Bion was able to

achieve knowledge through containing the anxieties that were forced upon him in the group.

Sometimes in a group two people would start an interchange with each other and this was tolerated by the other members. This change of mood in the group was defined by Bion as the 'pairing group'. The group assumed, another basic assumption, that when two people meet together they do so for purposes of sex. Bion proposed that the other members of the group tolerated this exclusive exchange because sex gave rise to the hope that a child would be born in the future, what Bion termed a Messianic idea, that would have positive implications for the group in the sense of releasing them from their sense of bondage. The leader in the pairing group is therefore as yet unborn. The group's sense of bondage is the attitude of the work group which threatens them with the painful feelings of change.

It is the attitude of hopeful expectation to which the group clings in its anxious wish to get rid of the threat of having to learn from experience. There must be only hopeful expectation; the significant point is that the child of the pairing must never be born. A birth of a new idea, for example, would spell both loss of hope and change. Hence a new idea must be denied by statements such as 'This is not a new idea after all, it is just ...'. In societal groups and institutions, this antipathy to the new idea is so ubiquitous as to pass almost unnoticed.

The differential focusing on the work group activity and on the present basic assumption reminds us of Bion's description of the psychic 'binocular vision' produced by the contact barrier of alpha elements which allows the simultaneous interweaving of unconscious and conscious elements, giving rise to depth and resonance in thinking and analytic intuition. This was later elaborated away from the dichotomy of unconscious and conscious to the idea of viewing the psychoanalytic object from multiple vertices and also that of reversible perspective. In this way Bion moved psychoanalysis away from a positivistic stance.

In his re-view of group functioning, the last section of his book on groups, Bion, with his new understanding of Kleinian theory, postulated that the basic assumption group mentality was an attempt to obliterate persecutory feelings because

the group approximates too closely, in the minds of the individuals composing it, to very primitive phantasies about the contents of the mother's body. The attempt to make a rational

investigation of the dynamics of the group is therefore perturbed by fears, and mechanisms for dealing with them, that are characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position.

(Bion 1961: 162)

Bion later saw something similar in the psychotic's desperate attempts to prevent integration, even to the extent of destroying his mental apparatus. At the time of writing his papers on psychosis, Bion wrote about the psychotic's fear that integration would lead to the emergence of the terrifying savage super-ego. Later he was to speak instead of the catastrophic anxiety that occurs at moments of psychic change and that it is this that is so vigorously defended against by the attitude represented by the basic assumption mentality, which can also be seen as non-thinking and therefore associated with a -K or non-emotional link. In other words, his later formulation was that it was not just persecutory figures, and feelings, such as anxiety and guilt that were dreaded, but also the catastrophic loss of one's sense of security that is associated with mental change.

In trying to understand what lay behind the basic assumption group activity, Bion postulates figures from a fragmented primitive Oedipal myth. In the dependent group, there is one mature parent linked with one child, like Oedipus with his mother, as each group member tries to claim the leader for his or her own. In the fight-flight group one can see both the flight from the oracle's prediction and flight from the truth; the fight aspect being the killing of Laius, which stands for the obliteration of the necessary boundary between self and other, between individual and group. In the pairing group, there are two parents but the child, the future leader, has to remain unborn. What is not seen in any of the basic assumption mentalities is the coming together of two mature parents to produce a live and active child, which symbolically is the new and therefore threatening idea.

This foreshadows Bion's later work on mythology and his realization that it was not the narrative of these myths that was so important but rather the separate elements; that these elements could be recognized in an analytic session and shed illumination. Similarly he understood that it was not only the sexual elements of the Oedipus story that were important in psychic life, but that the elements of the story, as opposed to its narrative, were of cardinal importance in the structure of our thinking processes. For

example, in this work on groups, the importance of the threatening sphinx figure is brought out.

In so far as I am felt to be leader of work-group function, and recognition of that fact is seldom absent, I, and the work-group function with which I am identified, am invested with feelings that would be quite appropriate to the enigmatic, brooding, and questioning sphinx from whom disaster emanates. In fact terms are sometimes employed, on occasions when my intervention has provoked more than the usual anxiety, which hardly require interpretation to enable the group to grasp the similarity. I know of no experience that demonstrates more clearly than the group experience the dread with which a questioning attitude is regarded.

(Bion 1961: 162)

The work group in its inquiry represents this. The group feels extremely threatened by this inquiry because of the fear of what will be revealed – damage, murder, incest, guilt, persecution, basically the devastating upheaval of the old order of things. The basic assumption group activity is against inquiry because it fears the pain of these emotional consequences.

The first chapter of *Experiences in Groups* is the reprint of an article which was published by Bion and John Rickman in *The Lancet* in 1943, in which they both describe the experiment in the military psychiatric hospital at Northfield, where the former had been put in charge of the training wing. Bion found that he could not get down to any serious planning there because he would be interrupted in his office by a series of importunate requests. He knew then that what was required was discipline and set himself the model of a commander in charge of a 'scallywag battalion'. Two elements were necessary: a common enemy and a commander who believed in the integrity of his men and was not afraid of either their admiration or their hostility. The enemy he designated as 'extravagant expressions of neurosis'.

We want to draw attention here to something that is central to Bion's self-understanding. When he found that he could not get down to any work because of constant interruptions which were of neurotic origin, he might well have issued an order that he was not to be interrupted between 10.00 a.m. and midday, but this was not his way. He drew the conclusion that the frustration he was experiencing was not peculiar to him but that all the people



on the wing were also being hampered by the effects of 'neurotic extravagance'. Bion's attitude was both scientific and humanitarian, and was, as John Donne wrote, 'involved in mankind'. Donne had an understanding that his self, his being, was not separate from that of others but is part of a common substrate. This perception of the self was expressed by the seers who wrote the Upanishads over 2,500 years ago, and was shared by Bion, who wrote, 'The group is essential to the fulfilment of a man's mental life' (Bion 1961: 53).

The commander who issues the order that he is not to be interrupted from 10.00 a.m. to midday does not entertain the thought that he is just one of many suffering such frustration. His action does not have the status of a thought. He does not think at all. His action is motivated by the wish to be rid of this frustration and, remaining at the sensuous level, he does this through his order. It is inherent that other people do not feature within his emotional landscape. Bion's approach is different. He is frustrated but he observes himself, and the feeling of frustration reaches the status of a thought. Inherent in a thought is that it is the preserve of a relationship, that is, an 'open-ended reality in which there is no termination' (Bion 1992: 371). Bion's administrative action flows from a *thought* which is a product of the perception of his self in its reality of the selves of others. This is in contrast to the omnipotent self, which, with its sense of specialness, is an illusion and is not capable of emotional or mature thought. Thought is generated from the scientific, humanitarian self that is 'involved in mankind' and, inevitably, others are taken into account. ~~He~~