5 Groups and their basic assumptions—the influence of Wilfred Bion

Perhaps the most original theory of group and organizational behaviour was developed by Wilfred Bion who, together with Freud and Lewin, has provided a major source of theoretical influence. The main part of Bion's work was carried out when he was a member of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London, and in a book describing the history of that Institute, Dicks wrote: 'most of us in the Tavistock circle would assign pride of place to Wilfred Bion's massive conceptual contribution to the theory and practice of group relations' (Dicks 1970:309).

Bion, a practising psychoanalyst of the Kleinian school, still contributes to psychoanalysis by publishing a variety of books on the subject. However, his seminal work is a collection of papers published between 1943 and 1952 in which he related his various experiences with groups and gradually developed a complete theory.*

The Northfield experiment

In the last war Bion served as a psychiatrist with the Army and was put in charge of the training wing of Northfield hospital, a military psychiatric hospital involving about 100 men. He found that the soldiers' neuroses were revealed not only in low morale, dirty wards, and apathy, but also in the way in which he was continually besieged by both patients and staff with apparent

*These papers are now collected and published in one book—Bion

administrative problems that for Sofer were 'neurotic problems of persons writ large in organisational terms' (Sofer 1973:703).

In approaching this problem, Bion reasoned that, in strict army terms (he had been a tank commander in the First World War, gaining the DSO), discipline could be restored if the men could unite against a common enemy. He perceived this common enemy to be 'the existence of neurosis as a disability of the community' and concluded that this neurosis should be displayed as a problem of the organization (a problem that was hindering the training wing from working effectively) and that members should be encouraged to work collectively in order to overcome it. The result was a six-week experiment, now known as the 'Northfield experiment', that was to provide the basis for Bion's future work with groups. A framework of discipline was laid down for the soldiers, which said that every man must join a group, such as map-reading, handicrafts, and so forth. There was also a compulsory daily parade, which developed into a kind of therapeutic seminar where the activities of the wing could be discussed objectively.

As the training wing became more self-critical, the patients took more initiative and responsibility. Morale began to improve, more groups developed, and the increased cleanliness of the wards was noticeable, so that Bion could say: 'despite the changing population, the wing had an unmistakeable esprit de corps' (Bion 1968:21). The essential changes were that the men became increasingly concerned with their ability to make contact with reality, to form relationships with each other, and to work co-operatively and efficiently on a common task.

Implications of the experiment

The description of this brief experiment, first published in 1943, contained the seeds that were later to blossom into a comprehensive theory of group working (Bion and Rickman 1963). These are:

(i) Individual psychology is fundamentally group psychology. Behaviour by one member of the group influences, and is influenced by, all the other members.

(ii) The rational working of the group is profoundly affected by the emotions and irrational feelings of its members. The

full potential of the group is only released when this fact is recognized and dealt with.

(iii) Administrative and managerial problems are simultaneously personal and interpersonal problems expressed in organizational terms.

(iv) The group develops when it learns by experience in gaining greater contact with reality.

The emergence of a theory of group behaviour

In 1948 Bion started 'taking' groups at the Tavistock Clinic and his book *Experiences in Groups* (1968) describes these experiences and how he interpreted them. His initial reports showed that there was a great deal of boredom, apathy, and desultory conversation in the groups. The group members—some patients and some not—seemed to have one thing in common, namely, they were not getting what they expected and Bion was not behaving in the way they had hoped.

At this stage, it is important to see and understand Bion's behaviour in the group. In essence, he played the classic role of psychoanalyst giving interpretations of behaviour in order to make what was unconscious conscious, and bringing phantasy into the light of reality. However, the unique and innovative difference was that he treated the whole group as the patient, giving interpretations to the group and not to individuals. He said, very specifically, that group psychotherapy is not individual therapy done in public, but is directed to the group as a whole. He was clearly the leader of the group by virtue of being in the position of psychiatrist but, as he said: 'I take advantage of this position to establish no rules of procedure and to put forward no agenda' (Bion 1968:77).

Bion's behaviour caused some confusion and bewilderment in the group and led him initially to isolate two aspects of group behaviour for consideration. The first was the futile conversation of the group which, he said, was almost devoid of intellectual content and critical judgement. This was due to the influence of powerful emotions in the group which nullified any effective work. The second concerned the nature of his own contributions: They would seem to be concerned with matters of no importance to anyone but myself (Bion 1968:40).

As Bion persisted with his method and gained more experience of group behaviour, he gradually perceived regularity and patterns in what initially had seemed random activity. His book shows the slow unfolding of his theories and their gradual evolution.

The theory of basic assumptions

Bion described various group meetings in which two people became involved in a conversation and to which the rest of the group appeared to give attentive silence. He suggested that the pair and the group held the basic assumption that the relationship was in some way a sexual one. This assumption was unspoken and may have been quite unrealistic. Nevertheless, it seemed that the pair and the group behaved 'as if' this assumption was true, held, and agreed by everyone. It became the unspoken and unconscious basis for their behaviour, both influencing and directing it, and to which all the group members subscribed. From this, Bion developed one of the central parts of his theory. Whenever the group is working, it can behave as if a basic assumption is held in common by all the members, and this will directly influence the activity of the group. Bion called this the 'basic assumption group'. By this he meant that the group was behaving in a particular mode, 'as if' all the members held a basic assumption in common. He believed that the basic assumption could colour, influence, and suffuse any rational work which the group attempted to do.

According to Bion, there are three distinct emotional states of groups from which three basic assumptions can be deduced. Only one basic assumption will be evidenced at any one time, although it can change three or four times in an hour or persist for three months. The first of these is the basic assumption of dependency (baD).

Dependency (baD)

When a group is working on the basic assumption of dependency it behaves as if 'the group is met in order to be sustained by a leader on whom it depends for nourishment, material and spiritual, and protection' (Bion 1968:147). Consequently, the members of such a group behave as if they are inadequate and immature, knowing nothing and having nothing to contribute. At the same time, they act as if the leader is omnipotent and omniscient,

someone who can solve all difficulties and problems as if by magic. Bion quoted a member from a group, which he was taking, that exactly illustrates this. On being asked why he did not contribute, the member replied: 'I do not need to talk because I know that I only have to come here long enough and all my questions will be answered without my having to do anything' (Bion 1968:148). This basic assumption group is, therefore, hostile to any scientific method, for it acts as if power flows from the magic of the leader who may be idealized into some sort of god.

This cult of the all-powerful leader flourishes provided that someone is willing to play the role in the way the group desires. The group can also deify some idea or object, such as a 'bible' of the group's past events which then dominates its present activities. When these things occur, no learning nor any work can be achieved. For the basic assumption of dependency, in full operation, successfully defends the group from reality. The sole dynamic of the group's behaviour arises from the internal phantasies of the group, a sort of corporate madness in which every member colludes and which stifles any independent thought or co-operative work.

However, what happens in such a group when the leader fails to live up to the group's expectations? This must inevitably happen since no member of the group can possibly act as leader in the way the group's assumption demands. Anyone brave or foolish enough to attempt this role must, sooner or later, arouse the group's disappointment and hostility. This explains some of Bion's early experiences where the group clearly accepted him as the 'Doctor' who could cure all, but nevertheless ignored or rejected his contributions. The group was then in the basic assumption of dependency and Bion's behaviour did not fit the role of dependent group leader. Consequently, his words and his role were rejected with some hostility—he was refusing to collude in their unconscious phantasies.

According to Bion, when the group rejects a leader, because he fails them in their expectations, they appoint another one who is the sickest member: 'a thorough-going psychiatric case'. However, the same process will happen again, and the group will demote that leader and attempt to reinstate the former. This oscillation between believing that the leader is at one time 'good' and at another time 'bad', or 'mad' and then a 'genius', results in a highly emotional and explosive situation that may not be able to be contained within the group. It can spread to other groups and

only ceases when enough outside groups have been drawn in to absorb the reaction. In practice, this may result in complaints being made to 'a higher authority', such as a letter written to a member of parliament.

There is another way in which a group in 'baD' can react to development demands, and that is to split into two sub-groups, thereby forming a schism. One sub-group, by manipulating the leader, whether a person, a 'bible', or a tradition, will ensure that support for the group demands no painful sacrifices and it may therefore become popular, although stagnant and dogmatic.

The other sub-group may behave differently, manipulating the leader so that membership becomes so demanding that no-one will wish to join. The objectives of both groups, however, are the same: to prevent reality intruding into their phantasies.

Pairing (baP)

When a group is working on the basic assumption of pairing, it behaves 'as if' the members have met together in order that two people can pair off and create a new, and as yet unborn, leader. This 'hoped-for' act of creation is essentially sexual, although the sex of the pair is unimportant. The pairing assumption group is characterized by hope, the hope that a Messiah will be born to deliver them from their anxieties and fears. This hope can be expressed in a variety of ways, such as that the coming season (it does not matter which) will be more agreeable than the present one, or the method of group therapy will revolutionize society, and so forth. Yet, within this very hope lies the seeds of future disappointment, for the hope exists only as long as the leader, whether Messiah or idea, remains unborn. 'Only by remaining a hope does hope exist' (Bion 1968:152). In so far as the group succeeds in creating the leader, hope is weakened. For immediately this 'hoped-for' person or ideal will inevitably fail to deliver the group from their own fears, because these arise from within the group and include such emotions as destructiveness, hatred, and despair. Again, this basic assumption is essentially a defence mechanism of the group. It prevents the group from coming into contact with reality by keeping it a closed system. The dynamics arise entirely from within the group, allowing phantasies of what may

happen to obscure what is actually happening. This allows the group to deny any difficult and possibly painful actions which a realization of what is actually happening must bring.

Fight/flight (baF)

The third basic assumption which can influence the group's behaviour is fight or flight, that is: 'the group has met to fight something or to run away from it. It is prepared to do either indifferently' (Bion 1968:152). Bion said that fight or flight seem to be the only two techniques of self-preservation known by the group.

If a group is pre-occupied with this basic assumption, it will ignore all other activities or, failing this, it will attempt to suppress or run away from them. A leader is more important in this group than in the other two basic assumption groups, for action is essential to preserve the group. The person who accepts the role of leader in a fight/flight group must be prepared to lead the group against the common enemy and, where this does not exist, to create one. He is expected to recognize danger and enemies, and spur on his followers to courage and self-sacrifice. However, this leadership is based on paranoia: 'they' are endangering the group and 'they', wholly evil, have to be attacked and destroyed. Once the danger is passed, the leader is ignored and any statement made by him that does not involve fight or flight is also ignored. In Bion's concept, such a leader is entirely the creature of the group: 'the leader has no greater freedom to be himself than any other member of the group' (Bion 1968:177). Again, the group operating on this assumption cannot develop or do useful work, because all its energies are concentrated on the group's phantasies. Reality is not tested, or rather it is deliberately kept at bay, for otherwise the group would have to deal with the frightening realization that the enemy that threatens them is not outside the group, but within.

The work group

In Bion's terms, the 'work group' refers to that aspect of group functioning that is the 'real' task of the group. Any group, whether the small group of a committee or a large group, such as the Army, has a specific, overt task to perform. To achieve this, the members of the group have to co-operate and use a sophisticated approach,

organizing administrative and formal structures in order to achieve the task. Within this work group, certain ideas play a prominent part, such as development and the scientific method—however embryonic. In the basic assumption groups there is the underlying belief that an individual is fully equipped by instinct to play a full part in the group's activity. In the work group, however, members are aware that they have to learn and develop their skills, both personal and interpersonal, before they can make a full contribution. As a corollary, they realize that development results from taking part in such a group. This, perhaps, is the largest single difference between the two aspects of group functioning. The work group results in growth and development, the basic assumption group in stagnation and regression. The work group is in touch with reality, and in that mode the group operates as an open system, realizing that work has to be done to maintain the balance of forces between what is within the group and what is outside it. The basic assumption group acts as if it was a closed system, ignoring external reality and defending itself from it.

In this respect, Bion suggested that the characteristics of the work group are similar to the Freudian concept of the ego, which, as stated earlier, is that part of the mental apparatus that mediates between external reality and the rest of the self.

Another major difference between behaviour in the basic assumption group and the work group is revealed in the way in which people relate to one another. In the basic assumption group, Bion called this 'valency', 'the individual's readiness to enter into combination with the group in making and acting on the basic assumptions' (Bion 1968:116). It is spontaneous and instinctive, requiring no effort and appears to be an inherent part of human behaviour. On the other hand, in the work group, a conscious effort has to be made by each individual to understand the other person as they work together. This is something very different from valency, implying a developing skill in human relations; Bion called this 'co-operation'. By combining the concept of the work group and the basic assumption groups, Bion was able to put forward a unique and comprehensive theory of group behaviour. This demonstrates that a group is able to function as a work group in which the members co-operate to achieve a common task and, because they are in touch with reality,

develop and change as they succeed. Yet it also shows that the same group can operate as a basic assumption group, behaving as if the group had come together for pairing, for dependency, or for fight or flight. In this mode, the group uses its energy to defend itself from its own internal fears and anxieties, and consequently neither develops nor achieves any effective output.

It is important to realize that the work group and the basic assumption groups are not different groups containing different individuals, but the same individuals working in different modes. The emotions associated with each of the three basic assumptions can at any time suffuse the more rational working of the group. Conflict arises at the junction between the basic group and the work group.

Specialized work groups

Following these ideas, Bion put forward the idea of 'specialized work groups'. In effect these are sub-groups 'budded off' from the main group, whose main task is to deal with the basic assumptions on behalf of the main group, thereby allowing the work group function of the main group to proceed effectively. If society at large is taken as the main group, then various parts of it can be seen to be operating as specialized work groups. The Army can be seen as a specialized work group concerned with fight/ flight. The Church is primarily concerned with dependency, and the aristocracy with pairing, that is, hoping for the birth of a genetically pure leader, presumably the monarchy. However, they are continually in danger of actually doing something, working as a work group rather than as a basic assumption group. To counteract this they have to disavow any achievement continually and must translate action into basic assumption mentality. Thus, the Church will say, *Non Nobis, Domine* (not unto us O Lord but unto thee be the glory) after a successful piece of work; the Army will encourage the belief that anything can be done by force, providing it is never used; and the aristocracy will insist that they (and the monarchy) are essentially democratic!

A psychoanalytic view of the group

Bion initially attempted to develop his theories in general terms rather than relating them specifically to psychoanalysis. As he wrote: 'I attempted deliberately, in so far as it is possible to a psychoanalyst admittedly proposing to investigate the group through psycho-analytically developed intuitions, to divest myself of any earlier psycho-analytic theories of the group in order to achieve an unprejudiced view' (Bion 1968:165). He was not entirely successful in that aim. Underlying his concept of the work group and the basic assumption groups is basic Freudian theory. The group, when it is working rationally and co-operatively, is like the ego, mediating between reality and the self.

Like the ego, the work group can be influenced and, at times, overwhelmed by emotions arising from unconscious processes. In the group Bion played the role of analyst to the group as a whole, helping the group to bring these unconscious phantasies (unrecognized in the basic assumption group) into the arena of the work group, where they can be recognized and consciously dealt with in the 'here and now' in the way transference is dealt with in an individual analysis.

Yet how complete is Bion's theory so far? Are the basic assumption groups the final explanation which fully explain group processes and behaviours? Are they basic behavioural phenomena—cause and not effect?

Bion had already provided some clues that suggested that the basic assumption groups were interrelated in some way and could be the result of other, more primary, factors. He said: 'Sometimes it is convenient to think that the basic assumption has been activated by consciously expressed thoughts, at others in strongly stirred emotions, the outcome of proto-mental activity' (Bion 1968:101).

For Bion, this 'proto-mental system' is a matrix of undifferentiated physical and psychological events, from which flow the emotions that are proper to any of the three basic assumptions. At the level of the proto-mental system, the group develops until its emotions become expressible in psychological terms, and it is only when specific events emerge as observable psychological phenomena that each of the basic assumptions can be differentiated. For Bion, their interrelation is such that not only does group phenomena reveal the operation of a specific assumption, it also

implies a conspiracy between the work group and the operating basic assumption to confine the other two assumptions within the proto-mental system and not allow them to operate.

As well as this idea, the basic assumptions appear to have other common aspects, for example, they all include the existence of a leader. In the fight/flight assumption this is obvious. In the pairing assumption the leader, whether person or idea, remains unborn. In the dependency assumption a leader is required to play the role of magical god who can deliver the group from all ills. Yet, perhaps most importantly, the same emotions (such as fear, hate, suspicion, and anxiety) are apparent when any of the basic assumptions are operating. It is the combination of these emotions, including not only those revealed but also those suppressed, which are peculiar to each assumption. This evidence prepares the way for Bion to finalize his theory by putting forward his hypothesis regarding the behavioural mechanisms that underlie the basic assumptions.

Bion and Melanie Klein

It will be remembered that central to Klein's theories is the concept of projective identification, and the way in which adult behaviour can regress to infantile mechanisms characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. Bion used these concepts to complete and underpin his theory of groups, seeing them not only as individual but also as group phenomena. It is essential to realize that he placed these mechanisms and processes at the very centre of group behaviour: 'Without the aid of these two sets of theories I doubt the possibility of any advance in the study of group phenomena' (Bion 1968:8).

Bion believed that the source of the main emotional drives in the group arose through the processes described by Klein. The persecutory anxiety and fear, characteristic of the infantile position, occurs in the group when the members of that group are faced by the reality of their own behaviour. To protect themselves from these fears and 'in his contact with the complexities of life in a group the adult resorts, in what may be a massive regression, to mechanisms described by Melanie Klein as typical of the earliest phases of mental life' (Bion 1968:141).

The group also provides another stimulus to these processes in that, according to Bion, it can approximate very closely to the mother's body in the mind of the individual. This provides the

Individual dynamics, feelings, thoughts, beliefs became FORTIFIED, INTENSIFIED by the group. The CRESCENDO of a crowd at sports events

situation for mechanisms characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position to operate, so that splitting of both the ego and the object will occur, together with projective identification and denial.

These ideas help to explain the common properties of the basic assumptions and reveal that they are not in fact basic, irreducible behavioural phenomena. They are specific expressions of psychotic anxiety within the group and are defence mechanisms against this anxiety. Their common basis is concerned with the mechanisms of splitting and projective identification, and the primitive anxieties of part-object relationships. These processes can help to explain how the leader of the group is created; this is not fully described in Freud's concept of identification by introjection. The process operating is the Kleinian concept of projective identification—each member splits off parts of his ego and projects them into the chosen leader. Thus, the leader and the group collude in their phantasies, with the leader, in fact, as much a creature of the group as the latter appears to be the puppet of the leader. This leader is chosen 'not by virtue of his fanatical adherence to an idea, but is rather an individual whose personality renders him peculiarly susceptible to the obliteration of individuality by the basic assumption group's leadership requirements' (Bion 1968:177).

In the group dominated by the basic assumption of dependence, the mechanism at work is splitting, denial, and idealization. Good parts of the individuals are projected into the chosen leader and the bad parts denied. Hence, the leader can be idealized into a superhuman or god-like figure, with no bad or evil attributes, whose power is absolute and who works as if by magic.

The group, when it regresses and resorts to these Kleinian processes, is weakened in its ability to achieve a developmental contact with reality, in the way the primitive infantile ego is weakened and disintegrated when it resorts to splitting and projection in the paranoid-schizoid position. The more it attempts to separate 'the good group' from 'the bad group', idealizing the good and attacking, and fearing attack, from the bad, the more the individuals are resorting to their earliest relationship with part-objects. Like the infant working through the depressive position, the group, if it is to strengthen and develop, must realize that the good and the bad group is one and the same, and that ultimately the goodness and the badness is located within each individual. When that happens, the basic assumptions become inoperative and the work group triumphs.

The ancient myth of King Oedipus has always had a fascination for psychoanalysts because of the psychological truths it contains, and it still has power to illuminate group behaviour. In the story, Oedipus set out to discover and punish whoever was responsible for the dreadful crimes of matricide and incest. The final revelation came when he realized that these evil acts were carried out by himself and not by other people. In many ways this is a parable of projection, where the bad parts of the self are projected on to others who can then be persecuted and punished. The realization that these feelings originate within the self and represent internal persecutors can be terrifying, as terrifying as when Oedipus in his journeying met the Sphinx. The Sphinx was a monster who guarded 'the way' and asked a riddle of all travellers. Those who failed to answer were thrown over the cliff. The Sphinx asked Oedipus 'What walks with four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon and three legs in the evening?' Oedipus gave the correct answer: 'man himself', but this same sort of scientific questioning can still cause a group to experience the fear and terror which the dreadful Sphinx originally caused. An American analyst, Rioch, puts it this way: 'If the Sphinx were to ask "What is it that on Monday is wrangling, cruel and greedy; on Tuesday is indifferent and lazy; on Wednesday is effectively and intelligently collaborative?" one could easily answer, "That is man and it is also man in the group".' (Rioch 1970:66).

Bion's theories are essentially optimistic in the sense that all psychoanalytic method involves a belief in development, change, and improvement. For once the group faces reality, it realizes that it is facing itself and this causes its terrors and anxieties to flee, just as Oedipus by answering 'man' put the Sphinx to flight. Bion wrote: 'I think one of the striking things about a group is that despite the influence of the basic assumptions, it is the work group that triumphs in the long run' (Bion 1968:77). If these ideas seem somewhat obscure and theoretical, then the balance can be redressed by a quotation by Rice, spoken when he addressed a highly practical and work orientated conference.

> 'Work groups can behave with sophistication and maturity, and we can use the basic assumptions to assist task performance; the emotions associated with one basic assumption are then used to control and suppress the emotions associated with others. Mature work groups expect their leaders to mobilize

> the appropriate assumption for task performance. If the appropriate assumption is dependent, the leader has to be dependable but realistic; if pairing, potent, but with due regard to the limitations of his potency; if fight, constructively aggressive, brave but not foolhardy; if flight, able to extricate the group from a difficult situation, but no coward; nor must he expect to be able to solve all the group's problems in the process of extrication.'
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> (Rice 1965:27)

Bion's theory of group processes is shown in diagrammatic form in *Figure 3*.

Figure 3 Bion's theory of group behaviour