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Bion's work group revisited

David Armstrong

For several years I have been concerned, both in the field of Group Relations and in its application within the Tavistock approach to organizational consultancy, with Wilfred Bion's distinction between two modes of mental activity within group life. These he named, respectively, as *work-group* and *basic-assumption functioning*. Bion's interest lay in how the two interact in shaping our social experience, both consciously and unconsciously. My interest was first and foremost in the idea of the "work group" and the ways in which I felt this had tended to be underdeveloped, both in theory and practice.

I believe that this underdevelopment has led, and can still lead, to difficulties in taking the full measure of the unconscious undertow in group and organizational behaviour—and, in particular, our readiness to understand and make contact with the vitality as well as the defensiveness of our social experience.

In what follows, I revisit and offer a particular reading of the concept of the work group as this emerges in Bion's writing and consider its implications for the ways in which we both frame and interpret the dynamics of group and organizational relations.

The work group revisited

The origin of Group Relations, as we are familiar with it, both as a theory and as a method of exploration, is to be found in Wilfred Bion's distinction between the "work group" and the "basic" or "basic-assumption group". These terms are deployed to capture and define two aspects or modes of mental activity identifiable within, though not necessarily confined to, all group life.

However, whereas the concept of the basic assumptions has been a continuing focus of attention, curiosity, and puzzlement, both in the literature and in the practice of Group Relations, that of the "work group" has in my view tended to be taken for granted, as if it were quite evident and unproblematic. It is as though its role were simply to get the much more intriguing theme of basic-assumption functioning off the ground. I believe this neglect has limited and may sometimes have distorted both our understanding and our practice.

Before turning to Bion's characterization of the work group, I want to emphasize that both of the two defining terms in Bion's account refer to aspects of mental or proto-mental activity: that is, activity on the borderline between somatic and psychic life. In this sense, there is no such thing as a work group or a basic-assumption group *per se*. There are only two modes of mental functioning, intrinsic to all our mental life and always in interplay, just as conscious and unconscious processes are always in interplay.

Bion regards these two modes of mental functioning as derivatives of what he terms our "inheritance as a group species". From this perspective, our destiny as human animals is from the outset embedded in the group and subject to its vagaries, whether or not an actual group is present. As Bion puts it, in the "Re-View" chapter at the end of *Experiences in Groups*:

the individual is and always has been, a member of a group, even if his membership of it consists of behaving in such a way that reality is given to an idea that he does not belong to a group at all. The individual is a group animal at war, both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitute his "groupishness". . . . In fact no individual, however isolated in time and space, should be regarded as outside a group or lacking in active manifestations of group psychology. [Bion, 1952]

I shall argue that both the work group and the basic group are manifestations of group psychology in this sense and that neither can, as it were, escape the clutches of the other. We are fated to experience

the tension between the two, here, now, and always. Anything else is an illusion.

One difficulty, however, in grasping the implications of this view, particularly in respect of work-group functioning—and this is a difficulty that Bion's own language occasionally compounds—is the way that it can be made to sound as if the work group were a purely intentional entity, created for a specific purpose and structured in accordance with rational principles to do with the relation between means and ends. It may be noted that Bion originally referred to the work group as the "sophisticated group". "Work group" was a term spontaneously introduced by group members, which Bion then co-opted: "the name is short and expresses well an important aspect of the phenomenon I wish to describe" (Bion, 1952).

For example, introducing the idea of the work group in the fifth chapter of *Experiences in Groups*, Bion begins:

When a group meets, it meets for a specific task, and in most human activities today cooperation has to be achieved by sophisticated means . . . rules of procedure are adopted; there is usually an established administrative machinery operated by officials who are recognizable as such by the rest of the group, and so on. [1961, p. 98]

He notes that "the capacity for cooperation on this level is great as anybody's experience of groups will show" and, after differentiating this capacity from what is evident at the basic-assumption level (which he will later refer to as *valency*), he continues:

In my experience the psychological structure of the work group is very powerful, and it is noteworthy that it survives with a vitality that would suggest that fears that the work group will be swamped by the emotional states proper to the basic assumptions are quite out of proportion. [1961, p. 98]

In chapter 7 Bion returns to this theme, distinguishing his views from Freud's:

when Freud quotes Le Bon as saying that "Groups have never thirsted after truth. They demand illusions and cannot do without them" (Freud, 1921c), I do not feel able to agree with that description. . . . I attribute great force and influence to the work group, which through its concern with reality is compelled to employ the methods of science in no matter how rudimentary a form. I think one of the striking things about a group is that, despite the influence of the basic assumptions it is the W Group that triumphs in the long run. [Bion, 1961, pp. 134–135]

In these passages there is, I think, an intriguing and somewhat unsettling shift of tone or register: from dispassionate to passionate, from disengagement to engagement. What is it that gives the work group as sketched in the first sentence cited above the power, vitality, force, and influence the subsequent sentences attribute to it?

Following his introduction of the term, Bion distinguishes three elements or ideas in the “mental phenomena” of the work group that are, he says, “linked together . . . just as the emotions in the basic-assumption group are linked together”. These are, respectively, the “idea of development” rather than “full equipment of instinct”; the “idea of the value of a rational or scientific approach to development, (in however embryonic a form)”; and also “as an inevitable concomitant of the idea of development (an acceptance) of the validity of learning by experience”.

Work-group functioning on this view is a developmental achievement. Participation in such activity is possible, Bion says, “only to individuals with years of training and capacity for experience that has permitted them to develop mentally”. In my own view, incidentally, this may be overstated, unless one keeps in mind that the beginnings, at least, of achieved maturity—which is perhaps another way of stating what Bion has in mind—can well predate our conventional views of adulthood.

How does Bion see the nature of the links he identifies in work-group mentality? It arises out of the work group’s commitment to action or, as he puts it elsewhere, to “the development of thought designed for translation into action”—because: “action inevitably means contact with reality and contact with reality compels regard for truth and therefore scientific method and hence the evocation of the work group” (Bion, 1961, p. 136). The use of “evocation” here seems to imply something distinct from a purely conscious intent.

In each and every one of these various respects, basic-assumption mentality is, using Bion’s formulation, the “dual” of the work group. Here is Bion’s description of this “dual” as it emerges in a group of patients:

In every group it will be common at some time or another to find patients complaining that treatment is long: that they always forget what happened in the previous group: that they do not seem to have learnt anything; and that they do not see, not only what the interpretations have to do with their case, but what the emotional experiences to which I am trying to draw attention can matter to them. They also show, as in psycho-analysis, that they do not have

much belief in their capacity for learning by experience—"What we learn from history is that we do not learn from history".

Now all this, and more like it, really boils down to the hatred of a process of development. Even the complaint about time, which seems reasonable enough, is only to complain of one of the essentials of the process of development. There is a hatred of having to learn by experience at all, and lack of faith in the worth of such a kind of learning. A little experience of groups soon shows that this is not simply a negative attitude; the process of development is really being compared with some other state, the nature of which is not immediately apparent. The belief in this other state often shows itself in everyday life, perhaps most clearly in the schoolboy belief in the hero who never does any work and yet is always top of the form—the opposite of the "swot", in fact.

In the group it becomes very clear that this longed-for alternative to the group procedure is really something 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 kind of group and one kind of man that approximates to this dream, and that is the basic group—the group dominated by one of the three basic assumptions, dependence, pairing, and flight or fight—and the man who is able to sink his identity in the herd. [1961, pp. 88–89]

This is Bion at his most trenchant and provocative. The crux, however, comes in the next sentence:

I do not suggest for a moment that this ideal corresponds to reality, for, of course, the whole group-therapeutic experience shows that the group and the individuals in it are *hopelessly committed* to a developmental procedure, no matter what might have been the case with our remote ancestors. [pp. 89–90; emphasis added]

It is this idea of our being "hopelessly committed to a developmental procedure" that I want to draw attention to, which Bion implies is an attribute not just of the individuals within the group but of the group as a whole. This seems, in turn, to imply that when earlier Bion has referred to the individual as a "group animal at war, both with the group and with those aspects of his personality that constitutes his 'groupishness'," the term "groupishness" qualifies both work-group and basic-assumption mentality and not just the latter. We are *driven* to one as to the other.

This is not just a neat theoretical sleight of hand. For it is this "almost-instinct"¹ quality attached to both aspects of mentality that

informs and underlies the intensity of the struggle or conflict that the group and its members are subject to. To put this another way, the "hatred of having to learn by experience" would seem redundant unless there were a continuous countervailing pull to learn by experience in the first place. And indeed it is this countervailing pull that Bion explicitly and paradoxically places as a factor in the extent of the hostility a group can mobilize against any attempt to clarify its tensions. So, for example, describing the psychiatrist's dilemma in a patient group under the sway of basic-assumption dependence, Bion (1961) notes:

it is essential that the psychiatrist should be firm in drawing attention to the reality of the group's claim upon him, no matter how fantastic their elucidation makes those claims appear to be, and then to the reality of the hostility which is aroused by his elucidation. [p. 100]

He then adds:

it is on occasions such as this that one can see both the strength of the emotions associated with the basic assumptions and the vigor and vitality which can be mobilized by the work group. It is almost as if human beings were aware of the painful and often fatal consequences of having to act without an adequate grasp of reality, and therefore were aware of the need for truth as a criterion in the evaluation of their findings. [p. 100]

In my view, Bion is saying that it is the unconscious pressure of work-group mentality and the anxiety this arouses in the dependent group that underscores and adds to the hostility to interpretation. In the same way, it is the unconscious processing of work-group mentality that may in time make a difference, may mitigate or bring about a change in the prevailing group functioning and a re-engagement with the *psychic reality* of the task. (Compare this with the discussion of this point in *Experiences in Groups*, pp. 71 and 118.) In other words, the hostility is a reaction to the unconscious acknowledgement of something felt to be true; that strikes home. Otherwise the interpretation would simply be ignored.

From this perspective, one might say, the work group is an expression at the group level of a development push or, as Bion will later put it, a "*compulsion to develop*", which is built in to the human organism from the outset. Correspondingly, the basic assumptions are an expression of a regressive pull, equally built in, which seeks to evade development and the mental burden or pain development implies.

The tension between this push and pull, which Bion first explored in *Experiences in Groups*, foreshadows and, one might suggest, recapitulates the story of the individual life that Bion was to spend the rest of *his* life investigating, through the lens of psychoanalytic practice.

In order to understand what happens in groups, as to understand what happens in the inner world each of us inhabits, both poles have to be held in view. It is as if they are co-dependent, each operating as a silent, unconscious complement to the other.

This point is important because there is sometimes a tendency to construe the distinction between work group and basic group in terms of a differentiation between conscious and unconscious processes. And indeed Bion's terminology of "sophisticated" and "basic" can play into this, as also can his implicit references to Freud's distinction between primary and secondary processes. A parallel tendency is to emphasize the emotionality, often qualified by the adjective "primitive", characteristic of basic-assumption functioning as contrasted with the "rationality" of the work group.

But I think this is to confuse the work group as an intentional entity with the work group as an aspect, one might almost say a *basic* aspect, of human mentality, of which the intentional group is an outcrop. In this guise the work group exerts an influence on our experience in groups that can be no less unconscious than the basic assumptions. Indeed, I believe the unconscious life of the group, as of the organization, is always an expression or function of both push and pull. Correspondingly, the task of the consultant is not simply to probe the to-ing and fro-ing of the basic assumptions as he or she becomes aware of these movements but, rather, to probe the reciprocal influence of the two levels of mentality operating within the group and the forces that influence them.

Here one comes up against a difficulty that is intrinsic not so much to the theory of Group Relations, nor necessarily to its use as an exploratory tool in applied settings, but, rather, to its institutionalization in Group Relations conferences and events. Such conferences, in my view, both open up and simultaneously circumscribe or set limits to what can be explored. Whether or not this circumscription is inevitable and, if not, how it can be avoided is not immediately clear.

The argument runs as follows.² Group relations conferences, whatever the titles they trade under, are temporary training institutions set up to explore or study the tensions inherent in group life, using a method of experiential learning. This is their manifest intention or "primary task". In order to study these tensions, a frame must be

created which mobilizes such tensions from the outset. In part this frame is created by the very definition of the task, since, as Bob Gosling put it with characteristic bluntness, "setting up a group that studies its own tensions is a rather peculiar social experience". This peculiarity is, in turn, considerably compounded by the combination of under- and over-determination that, appropriately enough, characterizes the organization and structure of such conferences and correspondingly the behaviour of staff in their work roles.

By "underdetermination" I am referring to the stance taken by consultant staff within the here-and-now events: the refusal to answer questions, to structure the conversation, to address members as individuals, and so on, all of which are aspects of the rejection of basic-assumption leadership. The impact of this, in Bion's own early practice, is wonderfully well caught in Eric Trist's description of his own experiences as a participant observer in the first of the patient groups taken by Bion at the Tavistock Clinic after the War:

for weeks on end I remained completely at sea about what he was doing though I knew well enough his distinction between group and individual interpretations, his principle of keeping to the former and of concentrating on the group's attitude to himself etc. In terms of cricket he was letting go by balls I would have expected him to hit and hitting balls I would have expected him to let go by. He was following a pattern unintelligible to me and using a map I did not know. [Trist, 1985, p. 31]

By "overdetermination" I am referring to the firmness, often experienced as rigidity, with which boundaries are observed by staff, in particular boundaries of time, which may be taken as the accentuation, almost to the point of caricature, of a work-group culture.

To put this another way, undue obtrusion of the basic group is precisely what the design of such conferences seeks to sustain and hence make available for exploration. Inevitably, then, attention tends to focus on this level of mental functioning. Correspondingly, the part played by work-group mentality in shaping the tensions that are being experienced can slip out of view. Often, it operates as a silent factor, expressed in members' readiness to stay in the field of what can be an extraordinarily unsettling experience and in the ways in which the motives, values and competences of the staff are continually being tested, including the nature of the authority they exercise and draw on. I am reminded of Bion's comment, offered in the course of a critique of Freud's views on leadership, that "for reasons I have given, the work-group leader is either harmless through lack of influ-

ence with the group or else a man whose grasp of reality is such that it carries authority" (1961, p. 178). It is in so far as the staff can become aware of doubting their own grasp of reality in this way that they may be able to find evidence of the members' uneasy, ambivalent but inescapable commitment to development.

Why then should this matter? In what sense is this aspect of Group Relations conferences a limitation? Perhaps within the confines of such conferences, not much. It is rather outside these confines, in the application of learning to the dilemmas and challenges of ordinary organizational life that I think there are grounds for caution.

Pierre Turquet, I believe, talking about the reflective work of staff in Group Relations events, used to refer to looking for "the 'because' clause". He wanted to draw a distinction between a formulation of *what* was happening and an interpretation of *why* it was happening. Bion's discovery of the basic assumptions might be thought of as deriving from his ability and readiness to move from "what is it I am feeling here and now?" to "why am I feeling it?" This is a move in which he had, as it were, to problematize whatever he found himself feeling. *Is this feeling something about me that I am importing into this situation, or is it something I am in some way being made to feel?* Anyone who has taken staff roles in conferences will be familiar with this move and the difficulties and dangers involved in making it.

But over and beyond this personal interpretative act there is for us, as perhaps too-knowing followers in Bion's footsteps, another question lying in waiting. Why is this particular dynamic configuration happening now? What is driving the emotional state I am both registering in myself and hypothesizing as both a factor in and a function of the group?

To address this question one has to dig into and interrogate the particular quality that attaches to the work-group function: not just the nature of its task but the psychic meaning or meanings that attach to the task and the particular anxieties that this meaning or meanings can arouse. This of course is the move that Isabel Menzies Lyth made in her seminal paper on the nursing service of a general hospital. Here, she showed that the tensions nurses were experiencing in their work arose out of the functioning of an organizational culture that had evolved in the service of defence against anxieties intrinsic to the nursing task and its psychic meaning. This in turn then robbed nursing staff of the developmental opportunities that task itself afforded (Menzies Lyth, 1960).

Menzies Lyth always acknowledged her debt to Bion's work and

was herself closely associated with the development of the Group Relations Conference model. But particularly in this paper, she also opened up a vein of thinking that both particularizes and extends our understanding of the interplay between work-group and basic-group phenomena. To put this at its sharpest, I would say that in the consultancy work informed by Bion's original differentiation of the two levels of mental functioning, it is the perspective afforded by Menzies Lyth's approach that has tended to drive and advance our thinking. In becoming alert to basic-group processes in organizational settings, we have come to read these as both an expression and a signal of something unformulated, feared, or evaded that is intrinsic to the nature of the work and its developmental challenges, and the resonances these evoke in the inner world—or it might equally be, as an expression of the nature of the relation between that work and its surrounding context; territory that increasingly my own service finds itself occupying, working with clients who are wrestling with the challenges and fears, both for survival and for identity, aroused by the nature and pace of change. It is in these applied situations that we can best test out the practical significance and value of the Group Relations perspective. Group relations conferences are not an end in themselves, however valuable and deepening the experience may be. They are a prelude to application, if "application" is the right word. Perhaps "extension" would be more appropriate.

The point I want to make here, and which lies behind this suggestion, is that outside the conference territory we *need* to find ourselves thinking about questions that the conference itself can seem to bracket out. We do not often ask ourselves, *what is the nature of the work-group function in conferences? What is its meaning in psychic reality? What fantasies or fears does it arouse in us, and how do these fantasies and fears inform the patterning of basic-assumption (or basic-realm) phenomena, moment by moment?*

There is a risk, in not asking these questions, of over-emphasizing the pathological; or perhaps more accurately of reading the pathological as if it were a separate, self-contained mental domain. What is then missed is something one might call *the shadow of development*: the communication of an inner struggle that is at once both organizational and personal; the encounter with something not known or known but not formulated, which may certainly repel but may also attract.

As I suggested earlier, within the literature of Group Relations the focus of attention, curiosity, and puzzlement has tended to focus on the basic assumptions, while the work group has rather been

taken for granted. It may now be heuristically useful temporarily to reverse this focus: to take basic assumptions for granted, about which we can seem so agile, and to think afresh about the nature of work-group functioning, observing it as it emerges through the hidden, unattended, implicate order of our group and organizational engagements: in dreams, imagery, the flow of feeling, and the signals they both send and conceal.

*The "hidden compulsions" of the work group:
an example*

In conclusion, I offer an example of the use and potential value of this approach to the work group in consulting to an organization where the presenting symptom was a persistent and apparently intractable climate of low morale and inter-staff conflict.

The setting was the fertility unit of a long-established teaching hospital in a major city in Scotland. The unit had been set up a few years previously and had pioneered a variety of innovative approaches to IVF treatment. It had grown in size and had recently taken over another unit from a neighbouring hospital. There was a staff of around 25–30 people, including gynaecologists, embryologists, and endocrinologists, nurses, counsellors, and administrative staff, plus receptionists and secretaries.

Apparently highly successful and with a distinguished research record, the unit was currently suffering from what was described as "severely low morale", especially on the part of the nurses, counsellors, and some administrative personnel. There was felt to be a culture of blame around, accusations of bullying and harassment and a good deal of defensiveness and stress, which sometimes seemed to communicate itself to patients, who, in turn, could behave in what were seen as angry and inconsiderate ways.

I was invited to talk to people from the different disciplines and functions, with a view to doing some work with them on addressing the various difficulties and discontents they were experiencing. The invitation had arisen from a conversation between the lead counsellor and the appointed director of the unit, himself a distinguished physician but currently something of an "absentee landlord".

Talking to people from the separate groups confirmed the picture I had been given of the mental state of the unit, which was thought to be threatening its reputation as a well-functioning, healthy, and innovative enterprise. However, I was no nearer to understanding the *why*

of this: just what had gone wrong. I was presented with symptoms but could not come up with any convincing diagnosis.

It was then suggested that I might attend one of the unit's team meetings, to which all staff were invited: to observe what happened and the way in which people interacted with each other. The first meeting kicked off with quite a lengthy, enthusiastic, almost impassioned communication from a senior consultant about a number of recent developments. To myself as an outsider much of this sounded extremely encouraging: a real occasion for satisfaction and pride, a sense of hopefulness and achievement.

Among other successes, the unit had recently, through the senior consultant, negotiated a new contract for delivery of the service in another city. The recent figures published by the Department of Health had shown that the unit had one of the highest success rates for IVF treatment in the United Kingdom. Correspondingly, perhaps, staff—both consultants and researchers—were being invited to present papers on their methods at high-level medical meetings.

I began to notice, though, how low-key the responses of people were to this evidence of success. It was as if no one, apart from the consultant presenting this report, could bear to acknowledge it. During the meeting there was far more exchange regarding what *had not* been done than what had. There were complaints about problems in relaying information about patients, about administrative gaps and shortfalls, and about the “poor” quality of the physical environment. It was only towards the end of the meeting that the atmosphere brightened up, as the agenda moved to preparing for a Christmas party.

I suddenly found myself silently asking what may sound a rather odd question: *Why does this organization apparently need to preserve, maintain, and communicate this low-key atmosphere? Is this simply a reflection of low morale, or is low morale in some way a cover for a low-key response? And if so, why low-key?*

It then occurred to me, in a flash, that an answer was already present in the meeting—waiting, as it were, to be found. The consultant had referred to the unit as having the highest success rate of any IVF treatment centre in the country. And yet . . . in fact, it was just 15%. For the great majority of patients coming into the unit, then, the outcome was failure, not success. And it was the nurses, the counselors, the receptionists who were having to handle and manage most of the distress this failure caused. It was as if this shadow side of the enterprise could not fully be acknowledged—perhaps because to have

it acknowledged might have threatened to arouse an anxiety that could undermine the pioneering work of the gynaecologists, embryologists, and researchers. It was left to their assistants and auxiliaries to carry this burden, unacknowledged, day by day. From this perspective, one could imagine, the nurses and counsellors could not share the consultants' enthusiasm because the consultants could not share their pain. This aspect of the "psychic reality" of the work was denied. But turning a blind eye to it threatened and potentially compromised the vitality of the whole enterprise.

To link this to the argument of the paper, from one point of view, the unit might have been seen to be operating in a pure basic-assumption modality: oscillating perhaps between pairing and fight/flight. But at the same time this aspect of the group mentality could be read simultaneously as a signal of something else: an unacknowledged element within the psychic reality of the work.

On this view the emotional state of the group could be framed as an expression of just the tension between push and the pull I have been describing: both the compulsion to develop and the resistance against it. To take the measure of this tension, one had to dig into, discover, or probe the hidden meaning of the work itself, not just the stated aim or primary task, nor just the motivations of those engaged in it. Instead, the developmental challenges—both individual and organizational—implicitly embodied in that work had to be acknowledged, in some sense known, but as yet unthought: the hidden compulsions of the work group.

Notes

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1. I have taken this phrase from a poem by Philip Larkin, "An Arundel Tomb" (1988).

2. I am drawing here on a fine, but unpublished paper by Robert Gosling, "The Everyday Work Group", written after his retirement as a contribution to a festschrift for W. Gordon Lawrence (Sievers & Armstrong, 1994).