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# Bion's 'groupishness': essay on Bion's *Experiences in Groups*

MEMORY LANE

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**SUMMARY**

*Experiences in Groups* is a revolutionary text in the understanding and analysis of group dynamics which remains highly relevant to mental health practice today. This article considers its key themes as well as its development in the context of Wilfred Bion's work as a doctor and a psychoanalyst.

**KEYWORDS**

Psychotherapy; psychological treatments; history of psychiatry; psychosocial interventions; psychological medicine.

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Wilfred Bion (1897–1979) was an English psychoanalyst and medical doctor whose contribution to psychoanalytic theory – at a time when it did not lack for original contributions – is rivalled, perhaps, only by Freud and Klein. Beyond his highly original theory of thinking, Bion also developed a psychoanalytic approach that spoke to what he termed the psychotic and the non-psychotic aspects of an individual's personality, which allowed for the engagement and understanding of primitive processes in intensive psychological work.

*Experiences in Groups* (Bion 1961) is unique in Bion's career in that its papers were written either before or during his training as a psychoanalyst, largely drawing from his time training and working at the Tavistock Clinic in London. This was a formative time for Bion, when his intellectual development was charged by exposure to the biopsychosocial tradition emblematised by the 'Tavi', which was established in 1920 by the Scottish psychiatrist High Crichton-Miller following his experience treating 'shell-shocked' soldiers during the First World War.

## The 'groupishness' of Bion

Bion's first training analysis, with John Rickman, was stopped by the advent of the Second World War. Rickman and Bion became co-workers, moving to the Northfield Hospital in 1942, where Bion oversaw the rehabilitation ward for soldiers who had suffered psychological breakdowns while on active duty. Bion saw that the neurotic inertia of hospital life, with its emphasis on a passive, bed-bound approach, was inimical to the recovery of these men. Their true injury was to their fighting spirit (Hinshelwood 2023: pp. 30–47). He therefore oversaw with Rickman a series of 'experiments' where soldiers were placed in 'activity groups', attending to various aspects of hospital life and treating their illnesses not as individual maladies but problems for the group as a whole. Bion realised that all of us are 'group animals' whether we like it or not, and individuals will, consciously or not, hold their own intense beliefs about the attitudes of 'the group' and its intentions towards them (Gordon 2013). Bion called this a person's 'groupishness' – 'his inalienable quality as a herd animal' (Bion 1961: p. 95) – writing that 'no individual, however isolated in time or space, should be regarded as outside a group or lacking in active manifestations of group psychology' (p. 132).

Bion's stretch as a wartime psychiatrist continues to have an impact. His use of 'leaderless groups', where a recruit's capacity to disregard or take in his fellow soldier's interests in the context of real-life situations, is still used today. His 'Northfield experiments', where soldiers, as far as possible, were encouraged to have normal social lives (cleaning their barracks, cooking dinners, even organising dance classes) put an emphasis on thinking and speaking together, on asking questions, in an infantry culture where the unconscious charge is very often to simply obey. This was not without its controversies. In fact, Bion and Rickman's initial experiment had to close after 6 weeks, and military authorities ordered a transfer for the pair, after which Bion eventually returned to the Tavistock Clinic.

## Experiences in groups

For a book that has become a sort of lodestone for social psychologists and organisational consultants (as well as all those interested in group dynamics and its synthesis with psychoanalysis), *Experiences in Groups* begins in a startling fashion with Bion's admission that his 'own technique' – which the



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Professional Committee of the Tavistock has asked him to apply to both staff and patients – is something of a mystery to him. 'It was true,' he writes, that he 'had experience of trying to persuade groups composed of patients to make the study of their tensions a group task', but whether this could be a treatment (or more beguilingly still, 'a cure') was a moot point (Bion 1961: p. 29). Still, as Bion observes, the participants in his groups frequently arrived expecting him to deliver the psychotherapeutic equivalent of a sermon on the mount, and they were sorely disappointed and frustrated when this did not occur. One of Bion's first observations, then, was that a group naturally looks for its leader. Why does it do this? And beyond that, what task is the group even there to do (i.e. what is the function of this thing called 'the group' that needs to be led)?

Bion's central tenet was that a group behaves as if there are actually two groups within it, operating and present simultaneously (Hume 2010). He termed these the 'work group' and the 'basic-assumption group'. Whereas the work group is aware of its purpose and the reason its participants have come together (to focus on some consciously acknowledged task), the basic-assumption group is one in which that work is obstructed and impeded a group of unconscious phantasies (basic assumptions or mentalities), which Bion postulates all groups share and are often prey to. Each of Bion's three basic assumptions – dependency, pairing and fight/flight – is characterised by its distinct emotional state, which can be summarised as follows.

- *Dependency*: The group behaves as if the task is only to provide satisfaction and fulfilment for its members. The leader is expected to cater for all needs in the group and to relieve the group from any anxiety. Dependency is absolute and hinders growth and development.
- *Pairing*: The group behaves as if pairing between two members of the group will bring about salvation. Whatever the actual problems of the group, only a future event (the idealised 'pairing') will solve it. The group therefore is inclined to deny or evade the difficulties of the present.
- *Fight/flight*: The group behaves as if in a state of either 'fight' against or 'flight' from some perceived danger or enemy. A leader is sought to mobilise some 'action' the members can mindlessly follow rather than to seek a space for further reflection and thinking. The group is dominated by a paranoid state of mind where true creativity is stifled.

When these basic assumption activities are in the ascendant, the effect on a group is covert but instantaneous, almost like a reflex of which the group's members are not consciously aware. These covert aspects of the group are latent motivating forces for group members (Banet 1977) and contribute to what Bion called the 'group mentality' or 'the unanimous expression of the will of the group' (Bion 1961: p. 65). A group's culture is its response to the conflict felt between an individual's desires and the overriding mentality of the group at that point; and so specific cultures (of silencing, amplifying, distorting) can emerge to regulate group members' behaviours so that they are more in line with the basic assumptions held by the group.

Although the task of a group can be hijacked by basic assumptions activity, Hume (2010) points out that such powerful valences need not undermine the task of the group. On the battlefield, for instance, the dominion of 'fight/flight' is necessary as armies are geared towards enemy combatants. In-patient hospital care is structured around a dependency culture, which is required when patients are severely unwell. However, dangerous cults of personality can foment around the passionately held belief that a charismatic leader can deliver a group from its worst instincts and vices.

These were highly idiosyncratic ideas at the time, which Bion illustrates in a variety of clinical examples, most memorably of the therapy group that meets not to explore its members' emotional difficulties, but instead to respond to these difficulties with a slew of benign-sounding 'practical suggestions' in the round that amounts to an effective silencing of the group. One will recognise these dynamics, not just from talking therapies, but also team meetings, group supervisions and conferences. Bion observed, again and again, how hard it is to hold a space for thinking and how quickly and naturally a group may become suffused with its own primitive anxieties. In this way, his work is intimately linked with the object relations theory developed by his second training analyst, Melanie Klein. Bion provides a basis on which infantile psychotic anxieties and the psychic defences used against them (splitting, denial, projection) can be understood as group processes that are dynamic and continuous and that both the individual and the group struggle against.

## Conclusion

Bion's contribution to the theory of groups, and his rigorous focus on group-constructed interference with the individual's capacity to feel (Gordon 2013), have come to exemplify the 'Tavistock approach' to groups. Beyond that, the approach underpinning *Experiences in Groups* has had a profound impact on social psychologists, organisational consultants and any dynamically oriented



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study of group processes. It is strange then that Bion's own estimation of his bestseller and the critical response to it was mixed, and he commented towards the end of his life that it was 'the one book I couldn't be bothered with even when the pressure was on me 10 years later' (Bion 1985: p. 213). Maybe this is not so strange. Bion, like Freud and Klein before him, was always questing forwards, in search of truth. This led him in later years to his controversial ideas about 'O' or 'the unknowable ultimate reality', the thing-in-itself which he believed resided in all objects – material or not. He would have perhaps balked at any didactic or reductive response to his theories, which, much like his writing, is geared to stimulating further thinking on the part of the reader, further exploration, further work. *Experiences in Groups*, then, is best viewed not as an end-point (a biblical text to be assiduously followed) but as the stimulus for the reader's own forays into the endlessly complex dynamics that can arise when a group of people meet.

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